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Committee On  
Academic Freedom

July 3, 2018

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Your Majesty, Your Highnesses, Your Excellency:

We write to you on behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom (CAF) of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) to express our deep concern regarding the recent arrest of the world-renowned Saudi professor, scholar and women's rights activist, Dr. Hatoon Ajwad al-Fassi. Despite a paucity of details on the precise circumstances, reports suggest she was detained in Riyadh sometime between 21 June and 24 June, coinciding with the lifting of the ban on women's driving in Saudi Arabia. At this juncture, when the Saudi monarchy and Crown Prince Mohamed bin Salman present an image of themselves as engaged in a process of enlightened reforms, we call upon you to release Dr. al-Fassi from detention and allow her to continue her important work and contributions to both scholarship and society.

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 2500 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.

Dr. al-Fassi is Associate Professor of Women's History at King Saud University in Riyadh where she has been a faculty member since 1992. She is the author of the monograph, *Women in Pre-Islamic Arabia: Nabataea* (2007) and several articles on the status of women in the Arabian Peninsula, ancient and contemporary. A highly-respected historian of international stature, she is invited regularly to present her research at conferences and universities throughout the world. Furthermore, in 2008, she was inducted into the prestigious "Ordre des Palmes Académiques" - a French order of knighthood for distinguished academics and figures in the world of education and

culture. Alongside her scholarship, Dr. al-Fassi writes a widely-read column on contemporary social affairs for al-Riyadh newspaper. As social commentator, she is recognized for her astute observations, principled positions and judicious analyses.

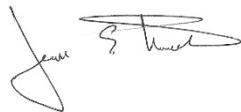
Dr. al-Fassi is, in addition, a prominent advocate for women's rights. In Saudi Arabia, she has been actively engaged in the "Baladi" women's rights campaign, initiatives to allow and encourage women's full participation in municipal elections, as well as efforts to lift the ban on women driving. In her capacity as a women's rights activist, Dr. al-Fassi enjoys an enormous and devoted following, not only in the Gulf region, but throughout the Middle East and North Africa, as well as in Asia, Europe and North America. With her wisdom, commitment, courage and compassion, she is, indeed, one of the best known and most respected of Middle Eastern women scholars and rights advocates.

In the weeks leading up to the much-anticipated lifting on the ban on women driving on 24 June, Saudi authorities detained, without charge, about sixteen advocates for women's rights. While there are suggestions in the press that the authorities suspect some of dealings with "foreign entities," we note that the timing of this crackdown and the related unsubstantiated claims against detainees tarnish the image of the kingdom and its leadership. We echo the sentiment expressed in the joint statement by United Nations Human Rights Experts, released on 27 June 2018: "Saudi Arabia has won acclaim for its modernization under Prince Mohammed Bin Salman, including the ending of the ban on women driving, but these arrests portray a contradictory stance in policy regarding women's rights."

We strongly encourage the Saudi government, in this important historical moment when the whole world is watching, to follow through on its much-publicized reforms and immediately release Dr. Hatoon Ajwad al-Fassi and other women's rights activists who remain in detention. We are confident that Dr. al-Fassi has been hopeful about the direction of change in her home country. We urge you to free her without delay and allow her to continue her most valuable work as teacher, mentor, scholar and advocate.

We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Judith E. Tucker  
MESA President  
Professor, Georgetown University



Amy W. Newhall  
MESA Executive Director