



**Middle  
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4 May 2020

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His Excellency Waleed bin Mohammad Al Samaani  
Minister of Justice, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia  
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Your Majesty, Your Royal Highnesses, Your Excellency:

We write to you on behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) to express in the strongest possible terms our dismay at the death of the renowned scholar, rights advocate, and political detainee Dr. Abdullah Hamid Ali al-Hamid. Dr. al-Hamid had been in a coma after suffering a stroke on 9 April in Al-Ha'ir Prison in Riyadh, where he had been imprisoned since 2013, and died on 24 April. We are gravely concerned by reports that Dr. al-Hamid had been denied adequate medical treatment as his health deteriorated while in custody. The death of Dr. al-Hamid after his repeated imprisonment over a twenty-seven-year period for his advocacy of civil, political, and human rights in Saudi Arabia stands in complete contrast to the vision of change your government now claims to advance.

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 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.

Dr. al-Hamid was a scholar and a poet who became a Professor of Arabic Literature at Imam Mohammed bin Saud Islamic University in Riyadh in 1988 after completing a doctorate in literary criticism at Al-Azhar University in Cairo. In his writing and commentary, Dr. al-Hamid articulated, in the words of Professor Madawi al-Rasheed, "the centrality of rights from within the Islamic tradition" which "allowed him to reinterpret Islamic texts and combine them with global discourse on democracy, civil society, and human rights." Dr. al-Hamid argued that *al-bay'a* was an Islamic contract that required the people's consent for, and involvement in, the political process and decision-making, and called for *jihad silmi* – peaceful struggle – as a form of civil resistance against the unchecked abuses of power.

The first of al-Hamid's six periods of arrest and imprisonment came in 1993 after he co-founded the Committee for the Defense of Legitimate Rights, after which he was stripped of his university position. Dr. al-Hamid was arrested again in 1994 and 1995, following the publication of a book about human rights, and in 2003, after he had become a member of a group of more than 100 Saudi reformers who released a petition entitled "Constitutional Reform or Not." Although the petition – which called for a constitutional monarchy with a separation of powers – came at a time when Crown Prince Abdullah was opening up a space for dialogue and reform, Dr. al-Hamid was charged with "preparing statements against the interests of the state." Sentenced to seven years' imprisonment, Dr. al-Hamid was released early but was later arrested for the fifth time, in 2008, when he voiced his support for a peaceful sit-in by women in Buraydah.

In 2009, Dr. al-Hamid co-founded the Saudi Association for Civil and Political Rights (ACPRA), a non-governmental organization that called for greater civil rights in Saudi Arabia and worked to help the families of detainees held without charge or trial. In March 2013, Dr. al-Hamid was arrested along with his co-founder, Dr. Mohammed Fahad al-Qahtani, about whom we wrote to you on 17 March 2014, after the Specialized Criminal Court dissolved ACPRA and charged Dr. al-Hamid and his colleagues with questioning the independence of the Saudi judiciary and the Council of Higher Ulama, planting the seeds of discord, and inciting public opinion against the security and intelligence services. Dr. al-Hamid was sentenced to five years' imprisonment together with an additional six years that had been commuted in 2006 by King Abdullah in a conditional royal pardon of the sentence from his 2003 conviction.

ALQST, the London-based organization that documents human rights violations in Saudi Arabia, has alleged that Dr. al-Hamid was beaten during repeated interrogations, which resulted in the loss of hearing in one ear, and subjected to medical negligence, which worsened his underlying health condition. In January, after Dr. al-Hamid's health had deteriorated, he was transferred to hospital and told by a doctor that he needed an urgent heart catheterization operation, but he was returned to Al-Ha'ir Prison, where he remained until his stroke on 9 April. ALQST also has claimed that Dr. al-Hamid was forbidden from talking about his declining health and denied telephone calls and visits when his condition worsened, to prevent news about his deteriorating health from reaching the outside world.

Your Majesty, Your Royal Highnesses, Your Excellency, we call on Saudi Arabia to immediately release all prisoners of conscience, including Dr. al-Hamid's brothers, Abdulrahman and Issa, who were also imprisoned for their involvement with ACPRA, and Dr. al-Qahtani and Waleed Abu al-Khair, with whom Dr. al-Hamid shared the 2018 Right Livelihood Award. Further, we call on Saudi Arabia to comply with norms of customary international



Re: Protesting the death of Dr. Abdullah al-Hamid

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law set forth in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which enshrines the right of everyone to freedom of peaceful assembly and association.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Dina Rizk Khoury', with a long, sweeping underline.

Dina Rizk Khoury

MESA President

Professor, George Washington University

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Laurie Brand', with a stylized, cursive script.

Laurie Brand

Chair, Committee on Academic Freedom

Professor, University of Southern California

cc:

HE Princess Reema bint Bandar bin Sultan Al Saud  
c/o Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia, Washington, DC  
Fax: 202-944-5983