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25 January 2021

His Majesty King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud
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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 our dismay at the ongoing imprisonment without due process of Salman Alodah, a religious scholar of international renown. Dr. Alodah has been in solitary confinement for more than three years, since 10 September 2017, and faces the death penalty on 37 charges of non-violent activity. We are gravely alarmed by reports that Dr. Alodah's health has deteriorated during his unlawful incarceration and we believe that his continuing detention on vague yet sweeping charges is an indictment of 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 2800 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. Alodah is one of the most popular scholars in Saudi Arabia and the Muslim world. A graduate of the Imam Muhammad bin Saud Islamic University, Dr. Alodah became a lecturer at the university in 1983 after teaching previously at the Scientific Institute in Buraydah. Dr. Alodah worked as a lecturer at the College of Sharia until he was fired in October 1993 for criticizing the Saudi government. He was arrested in September 1994 and imprisoned without trial for five years. After his release from

prison in 1999, Dr. Alodah completed a PhD in Sharia at al-Jinan University in Lebanon in 2004, having had his doctoral studies interrupted by his imprisonment.

In his writing, analysis, and public commentary, Dr. Alodah has been a consistent advocate for political reform and human rights in Saudi Arabia, through books such as *Questions on Revolution* and *Questions on Violence* and frequent participation in media programs, including his own show in the 2000s entitled *al-Hayat Kalimah*. In 1993, Dr. Alodah co-founded the Committee for the Defense of Legitimate Rights alongside Abdullah al-Hamid, another scholar of international renown about whom we wrote to you on 4 May 2020 to protest his death in custody after medical negligence by prison authorities. In the early 1990s, Dr. Alodah was associated with two petitions, the *Memorandum of Advice* and the *Letter of Demands*, which called for the implementation of *shura* (political participation) in Saudi Arabia, and in 2011 he was closely involved in the *Toward the State of Rights and Institutions* petition which called for a move toward constitutional monarchy in the Kingdom.

On 10 September 2017, Dr. Alodah was detained by unidentified officers from the Presidency of State Security, a new entity established by Mohammed bin Salman shortly after he became Crown Prince in June. Dr. Alodah's arrest came one day after he had tweeted "May Allah harmonize between their hearts for the benefit of their peoples" in a reference to the blockade of Qatar by Saudi Arabia and three other regional states. Saudi authorities detained other scholars, intellectuals, public figures, and activists in a wave of arrests in September 2017 and declared – without providing any evidence to the public – that they had uncovered an intelligence cell that was "conspiring with a foreign government."

The 37 charges against Dr. Alodah for which Attorney-General Saud al-Mojeb has requested the death penalty fall under the Saudi Anti-Cybercrime and Counter-Terrorism Laws. We note that both the Anti-Cybercrime and Counter-Terrorism Laws contain sweeping and vague categories of offences that "disturb public order" and "endanger national unity." We also note, with alarm, that the specific charges against Dr. Alodah all relate to his peaceful expression of opinion and non-violent association with other reform-minded individuals and organizations. [Examples](#) of these charges include: going against the "traditions of the country's recognized scholars," expressing cynicism and sarcasm about Saudi government achievements, claiming that the Saudi leadership monopolizes wealth, visiting Qatar on multiple occasions, and praising Turkey.

Since his arrest in 2017, Dr. Alodah's trial at the Specialized Criminal Court in Riyadh, which hears cases involving state security and terrorism



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charges, has been subject to repeated delays since the first session was held on 4 September 2018. During this period, Dr. Alodah has been held for months in solitary confinement in a tiny cell with no contact with the outside world and subjected to mistreatment, including being held in shackles and deprived of sleep, by prison authorities. In January 2018, Dr. Alodah was hospitalized for several days with dangerously high blood pressure. In addition, members of Dr. Alodah's family have been targeted by Saudi authorities: his brother, Khalid Alodah, was also arrested in September 2017 and is still awaiting trial for alleged sympathy for the Muslim Brotherhood; his son, Abdullah Alaoudh, has had his passport cancelled while working in the United States, and a total of 19 of his relatives have been placed on Saudi travel bans.

Your Majesty, Your Royal Highnesses, Your Excellency, we call on Saudi Arabia to immediately release Dr. Alodah, his brother Khalid, and all other prisoners of conscience who face charges relating to nothing more than exercising their right to free speech and voicing peaceful opinions that run contrary to official positions. We also call on Saudi authorities to end the harassment of members of Dr. Alodah's family and remind your government of its obligations under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, accepted as binding customary international law, to ensure freedom of peaceful assembly and association for all.

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 style.

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