



**Middle
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9 March 2023

His Majesty King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud
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His Royal Highness Mohammad bin Salman 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 protest in the strongest possible terms the ongoing incarceration of the prominent scholar Dr. Awad al-Qarni, and the [recent request](#) by Saudi prosecutors that he be sentenced to death. We believe that the charges levelled against Dr. al-Qarni, and the possibility of a death penalty, are entirely disproportionate to the alleged “crimes” he has committed. They are incongruous with the values, vision and reforms your government claims to advance, as well as being an affront to human rights.

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 2400 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.

Awad al-Qarni, a prominent, pro-reform scholar and law professor in Saudi Arabia, was [forcibly](#) arrested in September 2017 under the counter-terrorism law and has been charged with several alleged crimes involving social media usage. According to documents seen by *The Guardian* newspaper, which include al-Qarni’s ‘confession’, these charges include having and using a Twitter account to share ‘at every opportunity....his opinions’, using WhatsApp to share views ‘hostile’ to the Kingdom, and creating and using a Telegram account. He has also been accused of [joining and supporting](#) the Muslim Brotherhood, [“incitement to offend](#) the

leaders of other States,” and “incitement to fight in conflict zones.” Public prosecutors have called for the death penalty. Amnesty International has [stated that](#) such political cases are often based on ‘unfair’ trials and ‘confessions’ obtained through torture or other ill-treatment.

Al-Qarni was a member of the ‘Sahwa movement’ in the early 1990s. He has subsequently been portrayed in Saudi-controlled media as a dangerous preacher and [extremist](#), despite his being a well-regarded intellectual with a strong social media following, including 2 million Twitter followers. Al-Qarni's case is part of a [trend observed by](#) the human rights group, Reprieve, of scholars facing the death penalty for peacefully tweeting and expressing their views.

Your Majesty, Your Royal Highnesses, Your Excellency, using social media, including Telegram, Twitter, or Whatsapp, for peaceful purposes, is not a crime and certainly does not warrant the death penalty. Saudi Arabia has one of the highest rates of Twitter usage globally, and the Kingdom Holding Company has been one of Twitter's biggest shareholders for a long time, a trend that has continued under its new ownership. Reports of draconian sentences for those using social media to peacefully express their political views are, therefore, particularly alarming given the high potential user base. Most recently, in August 2022, Salma al Shehab, a Saudi citizen studying at Leeds University in the UK, was sentenced to 34 years in prison for her peaceful and lawful use of social media ([see letter dated 7 September 2022](#)).

We call on your government to categorically reject the prosecutor's call for the death penalty and to release from prison Awad al-Qarni, as well as the other highly-regarded clerics -- Drs. Salman Al-Aoudah, Hassan al-Maliki and Ali al-Omari – who, like al-Qarni, were arrested in September 2017 and charged with activities that do not resemble crimes. Furthermore, we reiterate our concern with the very harsh sentences levelled against other Saudi citizens for their peaceful use of social media. In addition to Salma al Shehab, Nourah al-Qahtani was sentenced to [45](#) years in prison for “using the internet to tear social fabric” and “violate public order” in Saudi Arabia.

Your Majesty, Your Royal Highnesses, and Your Excellency, despite your government's social reforms, substantial investment in Vision 2030 and promotion of Saudi youth as a key driver for change, such harsh sentences contradict the very goals you seek to achieve. We implore your government to take prompt action to cease the persecution and criminalization of peaceful expression of opinions.

Re: Dr. Awad al-Qarni

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Sincerely,



Eve Troutt Powell

MESA President

Professor, University of Pennsylvania



Laurie Brand

Chair, Committee on Academic Freedom

Professor Emerita, University of Southern California

Cc:

HE Princess Reema bint Bandar bin Sultan Al Saud, Ambassador of the
Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to the United States

Volker Türk, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

Irene Khan, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the promotion and
protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression