9 March 2023

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 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,

[Signature]

Eve Troutt Powell
MESA President
Professor, University of Pennsylvania

[Signature]

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