



# BRISMES

British Society for Middle Eastern Studies

British Society for Middle Eastern Studies, 71-75 Shelton Street, Covent Garden, London WC2H 9JQ

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The Rt Hon James Cleverly MP  
Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs  
UK Government

**By email: [fcdo.correspondence@fcdo.gov.uk](mailto:fcdo.correspondence@fcdo.gov.uk)**

2 February 2023

Dear Rt Hon James Cleverly,

## **URGENT: Saudi academics facing death penalty**

We write on behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom of the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies (BRISMES) to request that the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office urges Saudi authorities to ensure that the death penalty against academics Awad Al-Qarni, Salman Alodah and Hassan Farhan al-Maliki is dropped and that they are immediately released from prison. Founded in 1973, BRISMES is the largest national academic association in Europe focused on the study of the Middle East and North Africa. It is committed to supporting academic freedom and freedom of expression, both within the region and in connection with the study of the region, both in the UK and globally.

The cases detailed below, all shocking instances in their own right, form part of a pattern of repression and criminalisation of dissent by the Saudi government, and in which academics and scholars have faced harsh punishments, including the death penalty, for expressing their views. This repression has noticeably increased since Mohammed bin Salman became Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia in 2017. Given that the United Kingdom has longstanding, friendly diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia and continues to provide arms and military technology to the Saudi government, the United Kingdom is in a position to exert pressure upon the Saudi government to halt its repression of scholars and academics and its wider draconian restrictions on freedom of expression.

Awad Al-Qarni, 65 years old, is a prominent pro-reform law professor in Saudi Arabia, who has taught at Imam Mohammad Ibn Saud Islamic University and King Khalid University. His academic work focuses on Islamic jurisprudence and the Palestinian issue, and he is also reported to be a [trainer](#) in neuro-linguistic programming. He has been a vocal critic of the arrests of, and travel bans placed upon, critics of the Saudi regime. Al-Qarni was himself arrested in September 2017 and is



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facing the death penalty for alleged crimes including having a Twitter account and using WhatsApp to share news considered 'hostile' to the kingdom, according to court documents seen by the [Guardian](#).

Salman Alodah, a respected scholar and popular TV presenter, was taken from his home by security services without a warrant in 2017. According to Reprieve, he is facing charges that include 'sarcasm and mockery of the government's achievements' and 'inciting sedition by demanding the release of prisoners on media platforms'. Following his arrest, he was tortured by prison guards and held in solitary confinement for extended periods. As a result, Mr Alodah has been rendered partially deaf and blind. The Public Prosecution in Saudi Arabia is requesting a death sentence be handed down against Mr Alodah.

Hassan Farhan al-Maliki is a public intellectual and esteemed academic, with a large online following of over 280,000 Twitter followers and the author of multiple books on Islamic history, which are sold internationally. According to Reprieve, he was arrested in September 2017 without a warrant and held without charge for a year. During this period, he was held incommunicado and in solitary confinement for approximately three months before he was charged. Charges against him include 'conducting interviews with Western outlets'; 'possessing books' that were 'not authorised by the competent authority' in the Kingdom; 'publishing books' outside the Kingdom; 'publishing several tweets...questioning the principles of Islam' and that he sought to 'destabilise the social fabric and national cohesion' with his academic critique of certain Islamic schools of thought. The Public Prosecutor has further argued that Mr al-Maliki should be sentenced to death for academic work in which he queried the significance of 7th century Islamic figures and the validity of certain religious texts.

We are deeply alarmed that the above individuals are under threat of death for peacefully expressing their opinions, contrary to all international human rights treaties, including those signed by Saudi Arabia, such as, the Arab Charter on Human Rights. We request that you immediately contact the Saudi authorities to urge the Public Prosecutor to drop their demand for the death penalty in all the above cases and to release the individuals promptly. Moreover, we request that you call for an absolute death penalty moratorium in Saudi Arabia, pending a comprehensive investigation of all individuals currently at risk of the death penalty.

Meanwhile, last year, we wrote to the then Foreign Secretary Liz Truss regarding the case of Salma al-Shehab, a Leeds PhD student and mother of two, after she [received a 34-year sentence](#) for having a Twitter account and for following and retweeting dissidents and activists. She remains in prison, and we therefore also request that you follow up again with Saudi authorities in this case, to seek her immediate release and the dropping of all charges against her.

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We look forward to your response.

Yours sincerely,

**Professor Neve Gordon**

Vice President, BRISMES

On behalf of the BRISMES Committee on Academic Freedom

CC.

*Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, Minister of State (Middle East, North Africa, South Asia and United Nations)*