



BRISMES

British Society for Middle Eastern Studies

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Rt Hon Elizabeth Truss MP
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Minister of State for Middle East, North Africa and North America
Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office
King Charles Street
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By email: james.cleverly.mp@parliament.uk

18 May 2022

Dear Secretary of State,

Dear Minister for the Middle East and North Africa,

Re: The imprisonment and allegations of torture of Alaa ‘Abd El-Fattah

I write on behalf of the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies (BRISMES) to express our serious and urgent concern regarding the arrest and detention of Alaa ‘Abd El-Fattah and to call for his immediate release.

Founded in 1973, BRISMES is the largest academic association in Europe focused on the study of the Middle East and North Africa. BRISMES is committed to academic freedom and freedom of expression, both within the region and as part of its remit to advance the knowledge and study of the region both in the UK and globally.

Mr Alaa ‘Abd El-Fattah, who recently became a naturalised British Citizen, is an Egyptian intellectual with a long history of peaceful advocacy for human rights. He has been recognised worldwide for his human rights advocacy ever since his work during the 2000s, his blog brought him to the attention of fellow citizens at home and worldwide. In 2005 the *Manalaa* blog won the Special Reporters Without Borders Award. In 2014, he was nominated for the prestigious Sakharov Prize in recognition of his peaceful support for human rights. His recently published book has been translated into dozens of languages and is being discussed



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in newspapers, magazines and cultural events worldwide. In December 2021, after serving over two years of pre-trial detention as a result of spurious accusations of spreading “false news undermining national security”, Mr ‘Abd El-Fattah was sentenced to an additional five years’ imprisonment – a sentence which did not recognise the over two years of time already served – and despite having no history of violence he is currently detained in maximum security isolation at the notorious Tora security complex. In prison, he continues to be denied access to books and denied the opportunity of proper exercise in the open air. He is also being held in permanent solitary confinement, which has extensively documented ill effects – including permanent effects – on prisoners’ mental, physical and social well-being. Such confinement is considered in itself a form of torture. Solitary confinement is also proscribed under international law.

In October 2011, UN Special Rapporteur on torture, Juan E. Méndez, reminded the United Nations General Assembly that “considering the severe mental pain or suffering solitary confinement may cause, it can amount to torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment”. Such punishment is explicitly banned by Article 5 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). This prohibition is reaffirmed by Article 7 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Additionally, Article 1.1 of the 1984 Convention Against Torture (CAT) states that torture is “any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person” for any reason such as obtaining information or punishment. Article 16 of the Convention Against Torture prohibits “acts of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment”. The Government of Egypt is a signatory to all these instruments of international law.

Mr ‘Abd El-Fattah’s treatment is part of a troubling line of similar incidents involving both human rights defenders and lawyers in defence of arrested individuals. Mr ‘Abd El-Fattah’s own lawyer, Mohammed Al-Baqer, who is also the Director of Adalah Centre for Rights and Freedoms, was issued with an arrest warrant while representing Alaa ‘Abd El-Fattah himself.

Moreover, in Mr ‘Abd El-Fattah’s case like in many others, there are ongoing reports that those held in pre- or post-trial detention are being denied access to their families and/or legal representation, or that such access has been limited to the point of insignificance. In Mr ‘Abd El-Fattah’s case, for instance, it appears he was allowed access to his lawyer and to family members for a total of two minutes each. Such a limited amount of time makes the preparation of a full legal defence impossible and undermines the fairness of legal proceedings and the possibility of justice in the outcome of such proceedings.

As a direct consequence of the treatment he has been subjected to, Mr ‘Abd El-Fattah’s physical and mental health have been deteriorating. To protest this treatment, he began a hunger strike on April 2nd, following which his health has further deteriorated. His life is now in danger.



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BRISMES also notes that for the past nine years, many voices have been raised in protest at repeated violations of basic academic, civil and human rights by the Egyptian government, its judiciary and its prison service, and that these voices have been systematically targeted through police and judicial harassment.

We call upon the Egyptian government to follow the precedent of other human rights defenders who have recently been freed such as Ramy Shaath, and immediately free Alaa ‘Abd El-Fattah and all other peaceful protesters, critics and human rights defenders, and to drop all charges against them.

We also call upon the UK government to unreservedly condemn such ill-treatment and to exercise all legal and diplomatic instruments available to it in order to press upon its Egyptian counterparts the importance of guaranteeing the human rights and health of Mr ‘Abd El-Fattah and of other human rights defenders, guaranteeing consular access and full support for Mr ‘Abd El-Fattah.

Yours sincerely,

Professor Neve Gordon

Vice-President, BRISMES

On behalf of BRISMES Council