



BRISMES

British Society for Middle Eastern Studies

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

Email: office@brismes.org

Website: www.brismes.ac.uk

Professor Simone Buitendijk
Vice-Chancellor
University of Leeds
Woodhouse Lane
Leeds LS2 9JT

By Email: s.e.buitendijk@leeds.ac.uk

24 August 2022

Dear Professor Buitendijk,

Jailing of Leeds University PhD Student Salma al-Shehab

I write on behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom of the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies (BRISMES) to express our alarm at the conviction and jailing of Leeds University PhD student Salma al-Shehab. 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.

We are appalled Mrs. Al-Shehab has been sentenced to 34 years in prison for peacefully expressing her views on Twitter, advocating for women's rights and supporting human rights defenders also unjustly persecuted and jailed by Saudi Arabia.

After returning home to the Kingdom for a holiday in December 2020, Salma al-Shehab, a mother of two young children, was called in for questioning by Saudi authorities and was initially sentenced to serve three years in prison for the “crime” of using an internet website to “cause public unrest and destabilise civil and national security”. Earlier this week, an appeals court handed down a new sentence – 34 years in prison followed by a 34-year travel ban – after a public prosecutor asked the court to consider other alleged crimes. Court records cited the allegation that al-Shehab was “assisting those who seek to cause public unrest and destabilise civil and national security by following their Twitter accounts” and by re-tweeting their tweets.

The European Saudi Organization for Human Rights has condemned al-Shehab’s sentence, which it said was the longest prison sentence to ever be brought against any activist. It noted that many female activists have been subjected to unfair trials that have led to arbitrary sentences and have been subjected to “severe torture”, including sexual harassment.

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By all accounts, Shehab was neither a leading, nor especially vocal Saudi activist, either inside the Kingdom or in the UK. She described herself on social media as a dental hygienist, medical educator, PhD student at Leeds University and lecturer at Princess Nourah bint Abdulrahman University, and as a wife and a mother to her sons, Noah and Adam.

Salma al-Shehab's case is sadly far from an isolated example of repression, but part of a pattern of massive repression and criminalisation of dissent by the Saudi government. Long-term friendly diplomatic relations and the provision of arms and military technology to the Saudi government by Western governments including Britain have not done enough to encourage the current regime to stop its abuse of human rights. It is therefore all the more urgent for British university leaders to make clear that the Saudi government cannot act with impunity. We add our voice to those of the many other organisations and individuals that have already expressed alarm at Salma's imprisonment and echo the statement issued by Salma's colleagues in Leeds UCU. We ask that you:

- a. issue a public statement unequivocally condemning Salma al-Shehab's conviction and jailing and calling for her immediate release and the dropping of all charges against her.
- b. meet with the Saudi Ambassador as soon as possible to directly convey this message of condemnation to the Saudi authorities.
- c. write to Foreign Secretary Liz Truss and PM Boris Johnson urging the British government to likewise condemn Salma's conviction and demand her release and the dropping of all charges against her.
- d. establish a full scholarship and/or research position for a Saudi researcher at risk in Salma al-Shehab's name with immediate effect.

Saudi researchers need to know that the universities in which they place their trust and effort will continue to support them. It should be made clear to the Saudi government that repression and the closing of research avenues in the Kingdom will only be met with solidarity and the expansion of research opportunities at UK universities.

Yours sincerely,

Professor Neve Gordon

Vice-President, BRISMES

On behalf of BRISMES Committee on Academic Freedom

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CC

Kat Freeman, Executive Assistant, University of Leeds

Elaine O'Flynn, Executive Officer, University of Leeds