



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

The Rt Hon Liz Truss MP
Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development

The Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP
Prime Minister

By Email: fcdo.correspondence@fcdo.gov.uk

24 August 2022

Dear Liz Truss,

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 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, al-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 continued provision of arms and military technology to the Saudi government by the British government should not continue without the UK “conditioning” its diplomatic relations and ongoing trade upon Saudi Arabia’s respect for basic human rights. Like the journalist Jamal Khashoggi’s brutal assassination, Salma al-Shehab’s draconian sentencing underscores that without the insistence of the British government the repression, torture and coercion deployed by the regime will continue unhindered. We therefore call on your office to:

- 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. call the Saudi Ambassador to directly convey this message of condemnation to the Saudi authorities.
- c. call on the CEO of Twitter, a significant recipient of UK taxpayer subsidies, to review their operations in Saudi Arabia.
- d. establish an uncapped fast-track researcher-visa for Saudi scholars at risk.

Yours sincerely,

Professor Neve Gordon

Vice-President, BRISMES

On behalf of BRISMES Committee on Academic Freedom