

Letter to Saudi authorities calling for release of Palestinian poet Ashraf Fayadh

His Excellency Shaykh Dr Mohammed bin Abdulkareem Al-Issa
Ministry of Justice,
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Riyadh 11137 Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
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RE: Palestinian poet Ashraf Fayadh

Your Excellency,

We, the undersigned organisations, all dedicated to the value of creative freedom, are writing to express our grave concern that Ashraf Fayadh has been sentenced to death for apostasy.

Ashraf Fayadh, a poet, artist, curator, and member of British-Saudi art organisation Edge of Arabia, was first detained in August 2013 in relation to his collection of poems Instructions Within following the submission of a complaint to the Saudi Committee for the Promotion of Virtue. He was released on bail but rearrested in January 2014.

According to court documents, in May 2014 the General Court of Abha found proof that Fayadh had committed apostasy (ridda) but had repented for it. The charge of apostasy was dropped, but he was nevertheless sentenced to four years in prison and 800 lashes in relation to numerous charges related to blasphemy.

At Ashraf Fayadh's retrial in November 2015 the judge reversed the previous ruling, declaring that repentance was not enough to avoid the death penalty. We believe that all charges against him should have been dropped entirely, and are appalled that Fayadh has instead been sentenced to death for apostasy, simply for exercising his rights to freedom of expression and freedom of belief.

As a member of the UN Human Rights Council (HRC), the pre-eminent intergovernmental body tasked with protecting and promoting human rights, and the Chair of the HRC's Consultative Group, Saudi Arabia purports to uphold and respect the highest standards of human rights. However the decision of the court is a clear violation of the internationally recognised rights to freedom of conscience and expression. Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) states that, '[e]veryone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief'. Furthermore, under Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, '[e]veryone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers'. Saudi Arabia is therefore in absolute contravention of the rights that as a member of the UN HRC it has committed to protect.

There are also widespread concerns over an apparent lack of due process in the trial: Fayadh was denied legal representation, reportedly as a result of his ID having been confiscated following his arrest in January 2014. It is our understanding that Fayadh has 30 days to

appeal this latest ruling, and we urge the authorities to allow him access to the lawyer of his choice.

We call on the Saudi authorities to release Ashraf Fayadh and others detained in Saudi Arabia in violation of their right to freedom of expression immediately and unconditionally.

AICA (International Association of Art Critics)
Algerian PEN
All-India PEN
Amnesty International UK
American PEN
Arterial Network
ARTICLE 19
Artists for Palestine UK
Austrian PEN
Bangladesh PEN
Banipal Trust for Arab Literature
Bolivian PEN
Bread and Roses TV
British Humanist Association
Bulgarian PEN
Cambodian PEN
Canadian PEN
Centre for Secular Space
CIMAM (International Committee for Museums and Collections of Modern Art)
Colombian PEN
Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain
Croatian PEN
Crossway Foundation
Danish PEN
Edge of Arabia
English PEN
Esperanto PEN
Estonian PEN
Eritrean PEN-in-Exile
Ethiopian PEN-in-Exile
FIDH (International Federation for Human Rights)
Finnish PEN
Five Leaves Publications
Freemuse
German PEN
Ghanaian PEN
Haitian PEN
Human Rights Watch
Icelandic PEN
Index on Censorship
International Humanist and Ethical Union
Iranian PEN In-exile

Jimmy Wales Foundation
Kenyan PEN
Lebanese PEN
Ledbury Poetry Festival
Lithuanian PEN
Modern Poetry in Translation
Mexican PEN
Myanmar PEN
National Coalition Against Censorship (NCAC)
Norwegian PEN
One Darnley Road
One Law for All
Palestinian PEN
PEN International
Peruvian PEN
Peter Tatchell Foundation
Portuguese PEN
Québec PEN
Russian PEN
San Miguel PEN
Scottish PEN
Slovak PEN
Slovene PEN
Society of Authors
South African PEN
Split This Rock
Suisse Romand PEN
The School of Literature, Drama and Creative Writing at UEA
The Voice Project
Trieste PEN
Turkish PEN
Wales PEN Cymru