

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

March 27, 2023

His Royal Highness Mohammad bin Salman
Prime Minister
Riyadh, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Your Highness,

We, the undersigned Members of the United States House of Representatives, urge you to immediately release all persons whom you have imprisoned for sending tweets.

Jailing people for their expression, including criticism of their nation’s political rulers, is an intolerable violation of human rights and freedom of speech. No human being should spend a day—much less 19 years or 34 years—behind bars because they have displeased a government ruler with their opinions.

The people of Saudi Arabia have a right to their own ideas and to express themselves without state agents ripping them from their families and throwing them into jail.

Saudi Arabia has one of the highest numbers of active Twitter users in the world, yet Saudis who express even the mildest objection to your autocratic and theocratic rule are sentenced to jail for decades.¹ Individuals don’t even have to be on Saudi soil to be subjected to your state’s prosecution, punishment and oppression.

We were specifically appalled and stirred to action by your arrest of 72-year-old Saudi-American dual citizen, Saad Almadi, over tweets he had sent from the United States that were *seven years old*.² Although Mr. Almadi was residing in the United States when he made these tweets, he was arrested when he was visiting family in Saudi Arabia in the fall of 2021. His tweets mentioned corruption in your government and invoked Jamal Khashoggi, the Washington Post contributing columnist who your state agents assassinated in a gruesome dismemberment plot executed in Istanbul, Turkey.³

Mr. Almadi’s mild tweets of criticism were offered as proof that he had “adopted a terrorist agenda by defaming symbols of the state” and “supported terrorist ideology.”⁴ After his inevitable conviction, Mr. Almadi was first sentenced to 16 years in prison, a sentence which

¹ Ben Hubbard, *Why Spy on Twitter? For Saudi Arabia, It’s the Town Square*, NY TIMES (Nov. 7, 2019), <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/07/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-twitter-arrests.html>.

² Vivian Nereim, *‘Equality of Injustice for All’: Saudi Arabia Expands Crackdown on Dissent*, NY TIMES (Feb. 21, 2023), <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/21/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-dissent-crackdown.html>.

³ Josh Rogin, *Saudi Arabia Sentences U.S. Citizen to 16 Years in Prison for Tweets*, WASH. POST (Oct. 17, 2022), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/10/17/almadi-sentenced-tweets-saudi-arabia>.

⁴ See Nereim, *supra* note 2.

was extended to 19 years after he dared to appeal.⁵ While we were relieved to learn Mr. Almadi has been released from this Orwellian nightmare after widespread protest, his sentence also included a 16-year travel ban.⁶ We eagerly await word of whether your government will lift the travel ban to let Mr. Almadi return to his home in the United States.

Allow us also to raise the case of a young Saudi woman, Salma al-Shehab. A 34-year-old doctoral student at Leeds University in the United Kingdom, Ms. al-Shehab, was originally sentenced in August 2022 to an astounding 34 years in prison for using a Twitter account to simply share posts of online critics of your regime.⁷ Her case was retried in early 2023 and she was resented to a still astounding 27 years in prison, followed by a 27 year travel ban.⁸ According to Freedom House, she was held in pretrial detention for an astonishing 285 days, including at least 13 days in solitary confinement, and was denied access to an attorney while in pre-trial detention.⁹

On the same day Ms. al-Shehab was sentenced, Noura al-Qahtani, a mother of five who is nearly 50 years old, had her own sentence increased from 13 years to 45 years in prison, which is believed to be the longest sentence ever imposed for simple online expression.¹⁰ Ms. al-Qahtani had fewer than 650 Twitter followers, but was nonetheless accused of “using the Internet to tear the social fabric” and “violating the public order by using social media” under the country’s expansive and vague counterterrorism and anti-cybercrime laws.¹¹

So a mother of five is now in prison for 45 years in Saudi Arabia for sending a tweet while some people in the country have never served even a day for committing murder.

Even expressing mild online criticism of other people’s autocratic regimes can put a Saudi resident in danger. Mahdia al-Marzougi, a Tunisian nurse and Saudi resident with an audience of fewer than 100 Twitter followers, was arrested for her tweets commenting on events in Tunisia.¹² The 51-year-old, who has been held in solitary confinement, was sentenced to three years in prison until the Specialized Criminal Court increased her sentence to 15 years in September 2022.¹³

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ Nadine Farid Johnson, *Saudi Arabia’s Crackdown on Dissent Now Extends Beyond Its Borders*, WORLD POLITICS REVIEW (Nov. 10, 2022), available at <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/saudi-arabia-human-rights-violations-censorship-mbs/>; Mostafa Salem and Celine Alkhaldi, *Saudi Arabia Releases Dual US-Saudi Citizen from Prison After He Posted Critical Tweets about the Kingdom*, CNN (Mar. 21, 2023), <https://www.cnn.com/2023/03/21/politics/saad-ibrahim-almadi-released-saudi-arabia/index.html>

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ *Emblematic Cases of Political Prisoners: Salma al-Shehab*, FREEDOM HOUSE, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/free-them-all?name=salma-al-shehab> (last visited Mar. 21, 2023) [hereinafter *Emblematic Cases of Political Prisoners*].

⁹ See *Emblematic Cases of Political Prisoners*, *supra* note 8; *Saudi Arabia: Alarming Crackdown on Online Expression*, AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL (Feb. 14, 2023), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/02/saudi-arabia-alarming-crackdown-on-online-expression/> [hereinafter *Alarming Crackdown on Online Expression*].

¹⁰ See Farid Johnson, *supra* note 6.

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² See *Alarming Crackdown on Online Expression*, *supra* note 9.

¹³ *Id.*

In 2022 alone, Amnesty International documented cases of 15 people who were sentenced to prison terms of between 10 and 45 years in your country simply for peacefully expressing themselves online.¹⁴ As of February 2023, the organization documented the cases of 67 individuals who have been prosecuted for exercising their rights to freedom of expression and assembly, including 32 who were prosecuted for peacefully expressing their opinions on social media.¹⁵

While it is unclear exactly how your government was able to identify and apprehend all these “dangerous” online thought criminals, their prosecutions coincide with contemporaneous revelations that Saudi Arabian authorities infiltrated Twitter. In August 2022, a former Twitter employee was found guilty in federal court in California for spying on Saudi critics on the platform and then passing the information obtained that way to officials in your government.¹⁶ According to the indictment, the officials first approached the employee in May 2014 and paid him more than \$300,000 to provide the names and information of Twitter accounts posting any comments critical of your family and the Saudi regime.¹⁷ We are also aware that, through the Kingdom Holding Company, your family is a longtime financial investor in Twitter, which makes this sequence of events all the more shocking.¹⁸

While your government escalated this crackdown on free expression and sweeping violation of human rights over the past year, it went on to celebrate the second “Saudi Media Forum” in late February of this year. The Forum’s President Mohammed Al-Harhi called the forum “an opportunity to meet with intellectuals, writers and opinion makers from different countries of the world, and learn about the most successful media experiences.”¹⁹ During the Forum, Saudi Minister of Energy Prince Abdulaziz bin Salman highlighted the importance of accepting criticism and diverging viewpoints.²⁰

When you initially came to power, you spoke of making Saudi Arabia more open and tolerant. You promised to reform harsh laws and policies preventing the country’s progress. We had high hopes you were serious.

¹⁴*Id.*

¹⁵ *Id.*

¹⁶ Julian Borger, *Ex-Twitter Employee Found Guilty of Spying on Saudi Dissidents*, THE GUARDIAN (Aug. 9, 2022), <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/aug/09/twitter-saudi-arabia-dissident-spying>.

¹⁷ Superseding Indictment, *U.S. v. Abouammo, et al.*, ¶ 9, ¶ 26(j), CR 19-0621 (N.D. Cal).

¹⁸ See Farid Johnson, *supra* note 6; Matt Durot, *Saudi Prince Alwaleed Becomes Twitter’s Second Largest Shareholder*, Forbes (Oct. 31, 2022), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/mattdurot/2022/10/31/saudi-prince-alwaleed-becomes-twitters-second-largest-shareholder> (explaining Prince Alwaleed bin Talal bin Abdulaziz of Saudi Arabia made a \$1.9 billion equity commitment according to a Securities and Exchange Commission filing); Jacob Knutson, *Sen. Chris Murphy Calls for Probe into Saudi Arabia’s Stake in Twitter*, Axios (Nov. 1, 2022), <https://www.axios.com/2022/10/31/chris-murphy-twitter-elon-musk-saudi-arabia> (“Saudi Arabia, through a holding company partly owned by the country’s sovereign wealth fund, maintains a major stake in the social media platform that’s regularly used for political discourse, despite repeatedly repressing expressions of political dissent.”).

¹⁹ *Second Saudi Media Forum to be Held in February*, SAUDI GAZETTE (Jan. 2, 2023), <https://saudigazette.com.sa/article/628554>.

²⁰ Mohammed Helal and Omar al-Badwi, *Saudi Media Forum Focuses on Keeping Pace with the Sector’s Transformations*, ASHARQ AL-AWSAT (Feb. 21, 2023), <https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/4171081/saudi-media-forum-focuses-keeping-pace-sector%E2%80%99s-transformations>

Instead, not only have you further trampled on your own citizens' rights to free thought and free speech, but you have undermined the essential freedoms that sovereign democratic countries strive to protect for our citizens. These outrages undermine global political freedom.

We condemn your barbaric prosecutions and call on you immediately to order the release of every individual you have detained and incarcerated for sending tweets.

Very truly yours,




Jamie Raskin
Member of Congress



Nancy Mace
Member of Congress



Eleanor Holmes Norton
Member of Congress



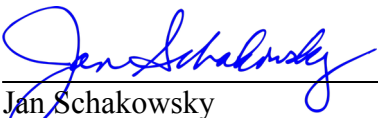
Betty McCollum
Member of Congress



Ro Khanna
Member of Congress



Maxine Waters
Member of Congress



Jan Schakowsky
Member of Congress



James P. McGovern
Member of Congress



Rashida Tlaib
Member of Congress



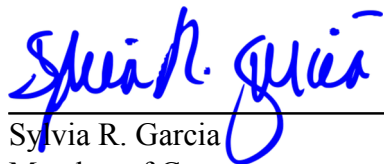
Jim Tokuda
Member of Congress



Mark Pocan
Member of Congress



Adam B. Schiff
Member of Congress



Sylvia R. Garcia
Member of Congress



André Carson
Member of Congress



Madeleine Dean
Member of Congress



Dan Goldman
Member of Congress



Sheila Cherfilus-McCormick
Member of Congress



Jasmine Crockett
Member of Congress



Jared Huffman
Member of Congress



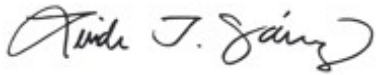
Barbara Lee
Member of Congress



Katie Porter
Member of Congress



David J. Trone
Member of Congress



Linda T. Sánchez
Member of Congress

Cc: Her Royal Highness Princess Reema bint Bander bin Sultan bin Abdulaziz Al Saud
Ambassador to the United States
The Embassy of The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
601 New Hampshire Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20037