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Ms. Agnes Callamard

Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions

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Subject: Three scholars at imminent risk of death in record executions this month in Saudi Arabia

Dear Special Rapporteur,

The Geneva Council for Rights and Liberties (GCRL) is writing to you with utmost urgency in relation to the concerning wave of summary executions taking place in Saudi Arabia in the past weeks. In particular, GCRL is much distressed about reports released on 21 May 2019 on the Saudi government's intention to execute three leading scholars, Sheikh Salman al-Awdah, Awad al-Qarni and Ali al-Omari, convicted on multiple alleged 'terrorist charges'. The execution is due to take place after the end of the Ramadan.

Sheikh Salman al-Awdah, a renowned progressive Muslim scholar, was arrested in September 2017 after he posted a tweet on his Twitter page, followed by over 13 million people, calling on Saudi Arabia and neighbouring Qatar to reconcile their relations after the air, sea and land blockades imposed by the former on the latter in June 2017. For over a year and a half, al-Awdah was reportedly held *incommunicado* in the Dhahban Prison (in Jeddah) in solitary confinement, and was only once allowed to be visited by his family, earlier this year. A source close to him reported that during his detention, he has been subjected to inhumane practices amounting to torture, such as sleep deprivation and prolonged shackling. In addition, al-Awdah was allegedly denied medical attention when he reported a blood pressure problem, until he fell seriously ill. All such actions constitute a grave violation of human rights and of the absolute prohibition of torture, one of the most well-established principles of international law. Finally, in mid-May, news were released that the Saudi authorities are seeking an inexplicable death sentence for al-Awdah on 37 counts, including "incitement against the ruler" and "spreading discord".

Similarly, Awad al-Qarni, a Muslim preacher, academic and author and Ali al-Omari, a TV presenter known for his support of women's rights, and anti-extremism campaigns, were also arrested in September 2017 and are condemned to the same appalling fate on the basis of their moderate political opinions and affiliations. However, no final verdict for the three scholars has been announced as yet.

Dear Ms. Special Rapporteur, repressive acts against human rights defenders and moderate "reformist" figures have been systematically used by the Saudi authorities as a way to shut eventual political opponents and keep the population quiet. This is a terrible violation of Saudi citizens' freedom of expression, enshrined in our main international human rights instruments, as well as of their sacrosanct right to life. According to sources, in April alone, the Saudi government has executed 37 people, including a minor, on various offences and bizarre terrorist charges, making it an absolute record month for mass executions in the past decade. Amnesty International reported that some of the victims were detained for way too long pre-trial periods, were not allowed a fair and transparent trial in line with international standards and their charges were decided on the basis of confessions extracted through torture.

While death penalty is an extremely appalling practice which must be abolished in each and every country in the world, GCRL finds that the numbers and scale of this phenomenon in Saudi Arabia makes it even more deplorable. Since the beginning of 2019, 104 persons were already killed and 58 more are said to be sat on death row, mainly from the Shia minority. Most of the executed persons faced this fate because of drug-related offences. According to human rights groups, 2019 is expected to witness an unprecedented peak in numbers of executions for Saudi Arabia, making it one of the bloodiest years in the history of the kingdom.

In 2018, anyhow, the situation was far from reassuring: according to Amnesty's annual Global Report on Death Sentences and Executions, Saudi Arabia classified as third among the countries with the highest recorded number of killings as a result of death penalty, with 149 executed persons (147 men and 2 women).¹ The report indicated that confessions extracted through torture or other ill-treatment were used to convict some of these persons to death. Such high numbers were not much different in the previous years, with reportedly 146 executions in 2017 and 2016, 158 in 2015 and 90 and 79 executions respectively in 2014 and 2013.

Dear Special Rapporteur, all of this is possible also because the international community continues to allow Saudi Arabia to disregard international law with no consequences. While on our side we will continue to bring to your attention urgent issues as such, our power is only limited. We need a strong and unified international voice, represented by yours, to put pressure on the Saudi Arabian government to immediately halt their brutal and arbitrary killings.

¹ Available at: <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/ACT5098702019ENGLISH.PDF> (accessed on 1 June 2019).

While it is too late for those who already lost their life to the repressive and autocratic policies of the Saudi government, the **Geneva Council on Rights and Liberties therefore urges you, Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary execution**, to do all in your power to pressure the authorities to immediately stop those at risk of death from facing the same abhorrent fate, including scholars Sheikh Salman al-Awdah, Awad al-Qarni and Ali al-Omari, and call on their immediate release.

In addition, **GCRL calls on you** to urge the Saudi government to immediately review their counter-terrorism legislation to prohibit the imposition of the death penalty on minors and to investigate in all allegations of torture and ill-treatment in a serious and expedite manner.

Should you have any additional query on the matter, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Please accept, Special Rapporteur, the assurances of my highest consideration.

Sincerely,

Lamia Fadla 

President, Geneva council for Rights and Liberties