

Human Rights Defenders and Political Prisoners in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain

Ashraf Fayadh: Poet Imprisoned and Sentenced to 800 Lashes

Ashraf Fayadh is an artist and poet in Saudi Arabia. Fayadh, who is of Palestinian descent and officially stateless, has curated international exhibits showcasing contemporary Saudi artists, including in Jeddah and at the 2013 Venice Biennale.

After a series of arrests and detentions in 2013 and 2014, Fayadh was convicted of apostasy and sentenced to death in November 2015. His alleged crimes include defaming Islam and Saudi Arabia, and distributing a book of his poems that the government claimed promoted atheism.

In February 2016, after human rights campaigners and artists worldwide helped to publicize his case, Fayadh's death sentence was overturned. He was sentenced instead to an eight-year prison term and 800 lashes to be carried out in 16 installments.

DENIAL OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AND FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION IN SAUDI ARABIA

Fayadh's case exemplifies a dangerous trend of harsh sentences imposed by Saudi Arabia, often for freedom of expression, or speech-related acts, including critiques of its government or the influence of extreme religious institutions.

Saudi Arabia bans the public practice of any faith other than the official state religion of Sunni Islam, and the country's religious police (the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice) enforce public compliance with the state's harsh



interpretation of Sharia law. Saudi law also penalizes expressive activities that challenge government policies or call for reform. Such repression is often achieved through the use of vague and overbroad criminal charges such as "sowing discord" or, in Fayadh's case, "spreading atheism" and "threatening the morals of society."

Convictions on these kinds of grounds are even more serious due to Saudi Arabia's extensive use of the death penalty.

The criminalization of freedom of expression not only imposes cruel and arbitrary punishments on individuals, it also suppresses open debate within

the Kingdom on vital issues facing the country. Saudi human rights defenders suspect that the charges against Fayadh were not only intended to punish him for posting a video of religious police lashing a man in public, but to suppress free expression from within Saudi Arabia's growing contemporary art scene. As a stateless person, Fayadh is a particularly vulnerable member of the artistic community.

THE U.S. APPROACH TO HUMAN RIGHTS AND COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM

The United States, recognizing that repressive government policies “sow the seeds of extremism and violence,” has called for “more democracy ... free speech and strong civil societies... [and] freedom of religion” to counter violent extremism.

Despite being part of U.S.–led global efforts to counter violent extremism, Saudi Arabia is moving in the opposite direction, punishing the exercise of free expression and imposing harsh sentences.

The brutal sentence imposed on Fayadh for peaceful expression only serves to illustrate the Saudi government's determination to curtail open debate on religion and politics. Whether in artistic form or otherwise, the people of Saudi Arabia need nonviolent channels to express their frustration and grievances. Suffocating these kinds of critiques not only violates human rights, it also undermines stability.