

Subject: **UK general election – take action on Salma al-Shehab and human rights in Saudi Arabia**

Dear [Insert local candidate's name],

My name is [your name] and I am a constituent of [insert constituency name].

The UK general election on July 4 will usher in a new government with a fresh mandate for change, whichever party wins. The incoming UK government will face significant challenges both at home and abroad. Among its foreign policy challenges will be negotiating the UK's relationships with authoritarian leaders around the world, including those in Saudi Arabia.

Given that you are running for office in Leeds, I also wish to raise in particular the case of [Salma al-Shehab](#), who lived and studied for her PhD at the University of Leeds prior to being arrested in Saudi Arabia and sentenced to 27 years in jail for peaceful activity on 'X'.

As a close ally of Saudi Arabia, the UK has considerable diplomatic leverage with which to press the Saudi authorities over such cases and other systemic [human rights violations](#) in the country. However, the UK has not used this to the full extent possible, and it has not been transparent about the nature and terms of the UK-Saudi relationship.

Below are 10 ways the incoming government and UK parliamentarians can prioritise human rights in their dealings with Saudi Arabia. Such measures will have a positive bearing on cases like Salma's, the dire situation in the country and avoid the UK becoming further complicit in abuses. I invite you to share your perspective on the following issues:

1. Forcefully raise human rights concerns and individual cases like Salma al-Shehab:

It is not clear that the UK government has thus far used the close nature of its ties with Saudi Arabia to forcefully raise human rights concerns and individual cases to the fullest extent possible. One such example is that of Salma al-Shehab, a 35-year old mother of two and dental hygienist who was arrested on 15 January after travelling to Saudi Arabia for a holiday from her home in Leeds in the UK, where she was studying for her PhD. She was later sentenced by Saudi Arabia's counter terrorism court to 27 years in prison, for posts on her Twitter account where she expressed support for Saudi prisoners of conscience.

There have already been numerous UK-based actions taken to demand Salma's immediate, unconditional release. These include letters sent by [340 staff members and students of the University of Leeds](#) and [400 academics from more than 50 UK universities and colleges](#), calling on the UK government to take a stronger stance in support of Salma's case. **The UK must show greater resolve to exert public and private pressure on the Saudi Arabian authorities to improve their human rights record and, crucially, raise individual cases of concern, such as Salma al-Shehab.**

2. Demand access:

Saudi Arabia's authorities are not subjected to any scrutiny and there is no independent monitoring of [prisons](#) or the courts in the country. International NGOs, [parliamentarians](#), and UN fact-finding missions are routinely [denied access](#).

British consular and embassy officials should continue to request access to relevant trial hearings, such as those involving prisoners of conscience, and the new UK government should press the Saudi authorities on the aforementioned issue of access to the country.

3. Protect Saudi nationals in exile, especially in the UK:

Amid mounting repression in recent years, an increasing number of Saudi citizens have left the country and sought asylum abroad, including in the UK. Yet even in the UK they often continue to face repression from the Saudi authorities by transnational means including digital and physical surveillance, threats and defamation.

The UK must provide protection for victims of transnational repression on UK soil and ensure that they have a secure point of contact to reach out to if threatened. There should also be a parliamentary inquiry into this matter.

4. Support multilateral action at the UN:

The UK has publicly raised human rights issues in Saudi Arabia at the UN Human Rights Council (HRC), including through the Universal Periodic Review (UPR). It has also signed on to joint statements raising concerns.

The UK must follow up on [recommendations](#) made during Saudi Arabia's [latest UPR review](#), in January 2024, to ensure the Saudi authorities implement them.

5. Hold individuals complicit in the murder of Jamal Khashoggi to account:

In July 2020, the UK introduced a Global Human Rights sanctions regime and froze the assets of 20 Saudi officials involved in the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in October 2018. Yet it significantly omitted Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who US intelligence [concluded](#) had approved the operation, from the list.

Sanctioning the crown prince would be a welcome step, but there are also other ways in which the UK could hold senior Saudi officials to account, such as not lending them credibility by [extending invitations](#) to visit the UK.

6. Be more transparent about institutional support and cooperation:

The UK has a long history of providing security, judicial and military assistance to Saudi government ministries that are widely accused of [complicity](#) in human rights violations. Such programs and agreements, including the [notoriously opaque Gulf Strategy Fund](#) (GSF), are shrouded in secrecy.

The UK should be transparent about the nature of this support, starting by publishing full information on the GSF programme, and halting funding pending a full and transparent review, as well as subjecting all other current assistance agreements to renewed and rigorous review.

7. Review and tighten export licensing criteria:

The UK is one of the [world's biggest arms exporters](#) and has been supplying large amounts of weaponry to Saudi Arabia, listed by the UK as a [human rights priority country](#), for decades, largely through the [secretive 'Open' system](#), which obscures the true level of the UK arms trade.

The new UK government should review and tighten its export licensing criteria, ensuring that human rights considerations are made a priority, and stop granting licences for the export of arms to the Saudi armed forces to prevent further indiscriminate use against civilians.

8. Make new free trade agreements conditional on human rights guarantees:

The UK government has sought in recent years, especially since the UK's withdrawal from the European Union, to increase trade and negotiate Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) with Saudi Arabia and the wider Gulf. Disturbingly, human rights and the rule of law have thus far not been included in the draft Gulf FTA's list of objectives.

The UK must write clear commitments to the rule of law and international human rights standards into the objectives of any Free Trade Agreement it negotiates with Saudi Arabia and the other GCC states.

9. Subject existing and proposed foreign investments to thorough scrutiny:

In recent years, Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund, as well as princes and businesses close to the Saudi state, have invested heavily in UK businesses and property. Some of these investments, such as in The Independent newspaper and Newcastle United Football Club, have the potential to make the UK more dependent on the kingdom, and therefore less inclined to criticise its human rights abuses.

The new UK government should use recent legislation such as the 2021 National Security and Investment Act to subject proposed foreign commercial and investment deals to robust scrutiny particularly those with significant public interest considerations such as the acquisition of media outlets.

10. Ban state ownership of football clubs:

The trend towards foreign state ownership of English Premier League clubs, such as the Saudi PIF's takeover of Newcastle United, not only damages the integrity of the game of football but also grants foreign states undue political, social, and cultural influence and cover for grave human rights abuses.

The UK's [Football Governance Bill](#) makes efforts to improve the regulation of football, yet clause 37 facilitates takeover attempts by foreign states and reduces efforts to hold state-owned clubs accountable. The government must remove this clause from the bill and prohibit state ownership of English clubs.

Thank you for your consideration and I am looking forward to hearing back from you.

Kind regards,

[Insert your name]