

# FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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**SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL:**  
**Bennett@state.gov**

Rex W. Tillerson  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of State  
2201 C Street, NW

Virginia L. Bennett  
Assistant Secretary  
U.S. Department of State DRL  
2201 C Street, NW

Re: Call for action to halt religion-based death sentence

Dear Secretary Tillerson and Assistant Secretary Bennett:

We are writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) and our more than 28,000 nonreligious members across the country to urge the Department of State to take immediate action in support of Ahmad Al-Shamri, who has been sentenced to death for his religious beliefs. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization whose purposes are to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church and to educate the public on matters relating to nontheism.

**A young man in Saudi Arabia has been sentenced to death for expressing his atheism**

Ahmad Al-Shamri was arrested on charges of atheism and blasphemy after he uploaded material to social media that allegedly trivialized Islam and the Prophet Mohammed. Shockingly, he was sentenced to death merely for expressing his views on social media, in a trial that focused on Islamic law. His case was brought before the Saudi Arabian Supreme Court for appeal, which ruled against Al-Shamri on April 25. Typically, these monstrous executions are carried out by beheading or shooting the victim.

Leaving Islam, or “apostasy,” is punishable by death in Saudi Arabia, where religious extremists have total control of the kingdom’s judicial system. It is the judges’ duty to preserve the Islamic state, resulting in horrendous miscarriages of justice, such as the execution prescribed to Mr. Al-Shamri. When a citizen steps out of line, judges crack down with horrifying punishments to protect their vision of their deity.

Al-Shamri’s sentence comes amid a flurry of international assaults on free speech that is critical of Islam. British actor, comedian and author Stephen Fry was until recently under police investigation for blasphemy, after he made critical and irreverent comments about God during an interview on Ireland’s National Television in 2015. While the investigation has been dropped, it is part of a deeply disturbing trend in increasingly prominent and reprehensible blasphemy prosecutions. The

latest of these has been the imprisonment of an Indonesian governor, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, a Christian, after he was found guilty of “insulting the Koran.”

Blasphemy laws and the chilling fates for those found guilty of the crime exist not only to punish the blasphemer, but to silence future criticism of religion. Such anachronistic laws freeze free speech, inquiry and expression of ideas, and enchain the ability of citizens to think freely.

**The State Department should take immediate action**

Blasphemy laws shackle an entire people under the mental slavery of one religion. They have no place in a modern, enlightened state. Their very existence is an insult to human dignity and intelligence. When a foreign government issues death sentences, jailtime or imprisonment for blasphemy, the United States must do everything in its power to challenge that sentence and to champion the ideals of democracy, free speech and freedom of religion. Freedom of religion necessarily entails the freedom to openly critique, analyze or express irreverence toward religion or religious belief.

The State Department’s Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL) uses a wide range of tools to protect fundamental human rights in accordance with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR).<sup>1</sup> The UDHR guarantees the right to “life, liberty and the security of person” (Art. 3) to “everyone . . . without distinction of a kind, such as . . . religion.” (Art. 2). Further, it specifically protects “the rights to freedom of thought, conscience and religion,” (Art. 18) and “the right to freedom of opinion and expression.” (Art. 19).

Executing an individual simply for being an atheist, or for speaking against religion, is a monstrous and egregious violation of these guarantees. FFRF calls on the DRL to take strong, immediate action to uphold these fundamental rights.

The DRL’s Office of International Religious Freedom states that it strives to “promote freedom of religion and conscience throughout the world as a fundamental human right” and to “identify and denounce regimes that are severe persecutors on the basis of religious belief.”<sup>2</sup> The State Department must use its diplomacy to prevent the execution of Mr. Al-Shamri and urge his immediate release.

If Saudi Arabia maintains Mr. Al-Shamri’s death sentence for atheism and blasphemy, the Office of International Religious Freedom should:

- 1) Report this horrific assault on religious freedom in the Annual Report on International Religious Freedom;
- 2) Recommend immediate and strong actions, including economic sanctions, to end death sentences for blasphemy, as Saudi Arabia is already a “Country of Particular Concern” (CPC) under the Religious Freedom Act of 1998;
- 3) Alert the United States Congress about this barbarous human rights violation and urge them to take immediate action to correct it; and

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<sup>1</sup> See [state.gov/j/drl/index.htm](http://state.gov/j/drl/index.htm).

<sup>2</sup> See [state.gov/j/drl/irf/](http://state.gov/j/drl/irf/).

- 4) Work with the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom to take any available measures to stop Mr. Al-Shamri's execution and to abolish blasphemy laws worldwide.

Further, opposing executions on the basis of religious belief and expression furthers at least two core functions the State Department.

First, the State Department is tasked with protecting Americans abroad. CFR 22 § 71.1. While Ahmad Al-Shamri is not an American national, failing to oppose his execution by a foreign government for his atheism would leave nonreligious Americans—fully 23 percent of the population—at risk if they were to visit or do business in Saudi Arabia. Instead of waiting for a nonreligious American to be charged and issued a death sentence based on their lack of belief, the State Department should take every possible action to fight this horrific civil rights violation now.

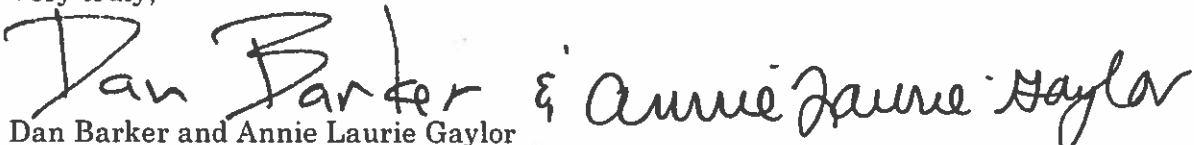
Second, the State Department upholds the National Endowment for Democracy Act, which states, "individual rights and freedoms (including internationally recognized human rights) . . . are essential to the functioning of democratic institutions." CFR 22 § 67.1(c)(1). The same Act urges "cooperation with those abroad dedicated to the cultural values, institutions, and organizations of democratic pluralism." CFR 22 § (c)(5). Allowing foreign regimes to execute its citizens based on their religious identity and speech is antithetical to these goals and must be vigorously opposed by the State Department.

FFRF urges the U.S. State Department to take immediate action to urge Saudi Arabian authorities to overturn the inhuman ruling to execute Al-Shamri for being an atheist.

Finally, if diplomacy does not yield results, and the United States cannot reason with Saudi Arabia, it ought to make clear that it will end its special relationship with this theocratic state, which is responsible for exporting a virulent ideology abroad and has an inhuman civil rights record at home.

May we hear from you immediately about what practical steps the State Department will take to protest this inhumane sentence and save Mr. Al-Shamri?

Very truly,

  
Dan Barker and Annie Laurie Gaylor  
Co-Presidents

DB:ALG:rdj