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Symbolic empty chair for Saudi blogger in the European Parliament

Press release from EFA MEP Alyn Smith (SNP)

An empty seat was left in the European Parliament today (Wednesday) for Raif Badawi, Saudi blogger and activist, winner of this year's prestigious Sakharov prize for freedom of expression.

Alyn Smith, SNP Member of the European Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee once again called on the Saudi authorities to release Raif Badawi, who has been sentenced to 1000 lashes and 10 years in prison on charges relating to "insulting Islam" and creating the "Saudi Arabian Liberals" website for social and political debate.



SNP MEP Alyn Smith (EFA)

Like many human rights activists previously recognised by the European Parliament, Raif Badawi was not allowed to pick up his prize, but his wife, Ensaf Haidar, was there to represent him during the ceremony.

Alyn said:

"Raif Badawi should be with his wife and their three children, who sought asylum in Canada having received death threats. Instead he is spending time in Jeddah's Briman prison in Saudi Arabia, facing an uncertain future. Amnesty International described the public flogging of Raif Badawi as 'a vicious act of cruelty'. But it is important to remember that Badawi is just the latest victim of Saudi Arabia's remorseless assault on free expression.

"While international pressure appears to have brought a halt to the flogging after the first 50 of 1,000 lashes

in January 2015, Raif Badawi remains behind bars at risk of brutal and inhumane treatment.

"Thanks to international condemnation of his treatment and recognition such as the European Parliament's Sakharov prize, Raif Badawi has become a well-known, emblematic figure. In reality, his case is representative of many other cases of dissidents and activists around the world who pay the ultimate prize for their commitment to fundamental human rights, including freedom of expression, values we in Europe hold dear.

"Saudi's human rights record speaks for itself, beheadings, imprisonment of political dissidents and human rights activists have significantly increased in the past couple of years. Domestically, it's about time the UK Government revisit their relations with the Saudis and a thorough examination of the legality of UK and EU arms trade with Riyadh is well overdue and would be a good start."

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