

LIFE AND FREEDOM FOR ASHRAF FAYADH

The international literature festival Berlin (ilb) calls on all individuals, institutions, schools and media outlets that care about justice and freedom to participate in a worldwide reading of selected poems and other texts in support of Ashraf Fayadh, on 14 January 2016.

Ashraf Fayadh, a 35 year-old Palestinian poet and art curator, who lives in Saudi Arabia, has been sentenced to death by a Saudi court on 17 November 2015 for the “crime” of apostasy. He was denied access to a lawyer throughout his detention and trial.

Fayadh has been a key figure in taking Saudi contemporary art to a global audience. Chris Dercon, the director of Tate Modern, and a friend of the poet, described him as “someone who is outspoken and daring.”

Besides renouncing Islam, Fayadh also stands accused of blaspheming and promoting atheism through his collection of poetry, *Instructions Within*, published in 2008. Fayadh has asserted that the poems are “just about me being [a] Palestinian refugee ... about cultural and philosophical issues. But the religious extremists explained it as destructive ideas against God.”

The charges, coupled with the lack of due legal process, show that it is not Fayadh who is guilty but rather Saudi Arabia that is once again guilty of disregarding human rights and the rule of law. In various surveys the kingdom continually ranks as one of the least free countries in the world. According to Human Rights Watch, Saudi Arabia’s ever more repressive laws now criminalize free expression and give the authorities excessive police powers that are not subject to judicial oversight.

Ashraf Fayadh’s case is not the story of one man, but a symbol for all the victims of a deeply repressive regime that is supported by Western governments who claim to value freedom and democracy above all. Right now Saudi Arabia sits on the UN Human Rights Council, a body whose members are supposedly those who uphold the highest standards of civil liberties. Saudi Arabia is there since 2013 thanks to secret vote-trading deals conducted with the UK, as revealed by Wikileaks. Other Western countries keep weapons and legitimacy streaming towards Saudi Arabia in order to keep oil flowing towards themselves. Caught in the current are ordinary people like Ashraf Fayadh, whose rights go unheeded in the kingdom and abroad.

Amidst all the recent outrage expressed by Western leaders against IS, in the rhetoric of war and threats of retribution, there has not been a word about Saudi Arabia’s role in helping to promulgate the virulent form of Islam practiced by IS. There is no doubt about the overlaps in their ideology: both certainly endorse lashing or beheading (on the latter front Saudi Arabia actually outdid IS in the last year) anyone who does not share their

views.

With this worldwide reading, we demand that the UK and US governments intervene on behalf of Ashraf Fayadh as a first step towards pressuring Saudi Arabia to raise its human rights standards.

We further demand that the United Nations suspend Saudi Arabia from the Human Rights Council until its abysmal record on upholding civil liberties improves.

We also call on Western governments, especially in the UK and the US, to acknowledge the problems inherent in maintaining cozy, unquestioning relations with a country renowned for systematic human rights abuses.

Please contact the ilb if you would like to participate. The email address is: worldwidereading@literaturfestival.com