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**United Nations Human Rights Council: 28th Session (March 2-27, 2015)
General Debate on Item 4; Tuesday, March 17, 2015
Speaker: CFI Representative, Michael De Dora**

Saudi Arabia and the Istanbul Process

Mr./Madam President,

The rights to freedom of religion, belief, and expression remain nearly non-existent in Saudi Arabia. On January 9, Raif Badawi, the creator of an online forum devoted to discussion on religion and politics, received the first 50 of 1,000 lashes in front of al-Jafali mosque in Jeddah. He now reportedly faces retrial for apostasy, for which the penalty is death.¹ On January 12, his lawyer, human rights advocate Waleed abu al-Khair, had his own prison sentence extended to *15 years*.² Meanwhile, women's rights activist Samar Badawi — wife to Waleed, sister to Raif — has been banned from traveling, and restricted from visiting jailed family members.

More recently, on February 24, a young man was sentenced to death for renouncing his faith.³ And just last week, on March 11, Mohammed al-Bajadi was sentenced to 10 years in prison for human rights activism.⁴

And these are only a few examples from the past *10 weeks*. Saudi Arabia has a lengthy record of punishing any individual or community that differs from the government's narrow version of authoritarian Islam.

And yet, in the face of these human rights violations, last week we learned that Saudi Arabia will host, in Jeddah, the next meeting in the Istanbul Process, which focuses on implementation of Human Rights Council Resolution 16/18.⁵ This means that while world leaders meet to discuss *combating religious intolerance*, Raif Badawi and countless other dissidents will sit just blocks away, languishing in Jeddah's Briman Prison. One assumes Saudi authorities will not arrange for diplomats and NGOs to pay these political prisoners a visit.

In fact, in a stunning example of hypocrisy, Saudi Arabia — like most OIC states — has not even come close to implementing 16/18.⁶ It is almost certain they will attempt to use this event to legitimize their position.

We welcome, indeed *encourage*, member state involvement in the Istanbul Process. However, given its human rights record, Saudi Arabia strikes us as an inappropriate setting for the next meeting. If Saudi Arabia is sincere about acting as host of the next meeting, it could *begin* to validate its role rather easily: release all prisoners of conscience immediately and unconditionally, drop all charges against them, and move to protect freedom of religion, belief, and expression. We urge them to do so, and urge member states to keep them accountable.

Thank you.

¹ <http://www.ibtimes.com/saudi-blogger-raif-badawi-could-be-beheaded-insulting-islam-faces-re-trial-apostasy-1832970>

² <http://www.gc4hr.org/news/view/870>

³ <http://www.saudigazette.com.sa/index.cfm?method=home.regcon&contentid=20150224234855>

⁴ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/11/saudi-arabia-jails-human-rights-activist-mohammed-al-bajadi>

⁵ As announced by Ambassador Slimane Chikh at a side event on Friday, March 13.

⁶ Indeed, Saudi Arabia has not even upheld its membership on the Council, which calls on member states to “uphold the highest standards in the promotion and protection of human rights.”