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Saudi Arabia: the authorities continue to punish activists for speaking up

The Saudi Arabian authorities must release all prisoners of conscience immediately and unconditionally and stop harassing the country's remaining free peaceful activists, said Amnesty International today, in the wake of new arrests, court sentences and arbitrary travel bans targeting peaceful activists.

On 3 December, **Samar Badawi**, a Saudi Arabian activist and wife of prominent human rights activist and prisoner of conscience [Waleed abu al-Khair](#), was prevented from travelling to Brussels to attend the 16th European Union NGO Forum on Human Rights. Security officers at the King Abdulaziz International Airport in Jeddah told her that the Ministry of Interior has issued a travel ban which prevents her from travelling abroad for an undetermined amount of time. The ban is contrary to her human right to freedom of movement and is a clear violation of Saudi Arabian laws that stipulate that travel bans can only be issued for a specified duration of time and that the affected person has to be informed of the travel ban within a week of its issuance.

Samar Badawi has been campaigning for the release of her husband who was sentenced to a 15-year prison term after a grossly unfair trial on 6 July. In September, she made an oral intervention at the Human Rights Council session in Geneva, where representatives of Saudi Arabia attempted to silence her by interrupting her talk a number of times. Since then, Amnesty International understands that she has received threats, presumably because of publicly discussing the case of her husband.

Two days earlier, on 1 December, women's rights activist **Loujain al-Hathloul** was arrested when she attempted to defy the ban on women driving cars by driving into Saudi Arabia from the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Security officers at al-Batha border city, in eastern Saudi Arabia, confiscated her passport and forced her to stay overnight in her car.

The following morning, **Maysaa al-Amoudi**, a Saudi Arabian journalist and presenter, was also arrested when she drove from the UAE to al-Batha to provide Loujain al-Hathloul with basic supplies, despite the fact that she had told the Saudi Arabian border authorities that she did not intend to drive inside Saudi Arabia. Within hours, both women were reportedly taken to a police station at al-Batha where they were interrogated before being transferred for further interrogations to the Bureau of Investigation and Prosecution in al-Hufuf city in the Eastern Province. Later in the day, Loujain al-Hathloul was taken to a correctional facility for women while Maysaa al-Amoudi was taken to the central prison, both in al-Ahsa in the Eastern province of Saudi Arabia.

Earlier in November, [Fowzan al-Harbi](#), a founding member of the independent Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association (ACPRA)¹, was ordered to appear in court on 19 November when the judge informed him that his 25 June sentence to seven years in prison has been increased to 10 upon appeal and ordered his immediate arrest. He was previously detained on 26 December 2013, but released two days before the Criminal Court sentenced him on 25 June to seven years in prison followed by a travel ban of equal duration for his peaceful activism. He was free pending his appeal but was banned from participating in social media

¹ For detailed information on ACPRA, please see [Saudi Arabia's ACPRA: How the Kingdom Silences its Human Rights Defenders](#), (Index: MDE 23/025/2014), 10 October 2014.

and socialising with others. His current rearrest appears to have been requested by the General Prosecutor who has accused Fowzan al-Harbi of leaking court documents related to his case, which he was made to sign a pledge not to do before he was released in June.

On 6 November, the authorities sentenced [Mikhlif al-Shammari](#), a prominent human rights activist and an advocate of the rights of Saudi Arabia's Shi'a Muslim community, to two years in prison and 200 lashes on charges related to his peaceful activism. In a separate case, on 17 June 2013 Mikhlif al-Shammari had already been sentenced by the Specialized Criminal Court (SCC) to five years in prison, followed by a 10-year travel ban, on charges related to his peaceful activism. The court also banned him from writing in the press and on social media networks, and from appearing on television or radio. The appeal division of the SCC had upheld that sentence in June 2014.

On 28 October, the authorities detained [Souad al-Shammari](#), a women's rights activist, after a four-hour interrogation session at the Bureau of Investigation and Prosecution in Jeddah. She was questioned about tweets from over a year ago which the authorities now seem to claim were inciting Saudi Arabian women to rebel against the guardianship system and were mocking religious texts and religious authorities. Souad al-Shammari, who used to work as a school teacher in Jeddah and has six children, was compulsorily retired from her post in 2011, reportedly because of her activism. She has since then been denied her pension and retirement benefits. She has been banned from travelling abroad since March 2013.

On 27 October the SCC sentenced three lawyers, [Dr. Abdulrahman al-Subaihi](#), [Bander al-Nogaithan](#), and [Abdulrahman al-Rumaih](#), to between five and eight years in prison and travel bans of seven to ten years for criticizing the judiciary and the Justice Minister. The lawyers were also banned by the court for an unspecified period of time from talking or giving interviews to media outlets, and from posting on social media. Activists believe that the court handed down these harsh sentences after failing to intimidate them with a combined fine imposed on them in June totalling 1,250,000 Saudi Arabian riyals (about US\$333,000) and, in September, by revocation of their licenses to practice law.

[Mohammed al-Bajadi](#) who is also one of ACPRA's founders, was brought to the Specialized Criminal Court for a retrial on 23 October. He was presented with the same charges for which he had already been convicted and is currently serving his sentence. He is being accused of similar offences as that of his fellow ACPRA members. Mohammed al-Bajadi's retrial comes months before his expected release after serving his four-year sentence to which, along with a five-year travel ban, he was sentenced by the SCC in a secret trial on 10 April 2012. He was denied legal representation following his detention on 21 March 2011 and throughout his trial.

One other founding ACPRA member, [Abdulaziz al-Shubaily](#), is currently on trial at the SCC on charges similar to those of other ACPRA members. His next hearing is on 14 December and he faces the risk of detention at any time.

Background

Saudi Arabia has in the past two years punished independent voices by sentencing over a dozen of the country's prominent human rights defenders to lengthy prison terms, and has forced others into silent submission. It has pursued its relentless campaign without criticism from its Western allies, who have thereby come to be increasingly perceived by human rights activists as condoning Saudi Arabia's crackdown on dissent in return for its involvement in the campaign against the armed group calling itself "Islamic State".

The crackdown on human rights activists is part of a larger campaign by the authorities to silence all forms of criticism that have revealed, either directly or indirectly, egregious human rights violations committed by the authorities. Those targeted included, in addition to the country's leading human rights activists including women's rights activists, online activists, family members of victims of human rights violations, dissident Saudi Arabian Shi'a

Muslims criticizing discrimination against members of their community, and anyone daring to communicate with international human rights organizations such as Amnesty International.

Draconian measures have included forcing people to sign pledges not to share any information about their harassment, and in some cases ill-treatment, at the hands of the authorities; using mass surveillance technologies to monitor online communication; threatening people with long prison sentences if they do not stop their activism and in some cases if they do not act as informants for the authorities; charging and sentencing activists and family members with the "offence" of "communicating with foreign groups" (which in some court documents have been named as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch); and in some instances bringing people before the courts, particularly the Specialized Criminal Court, which have handed down arbitrary sentences on vaguely worded charges and after grossly unfair trials.

A [new anti-terrorism law](#) that took effect in February, following its approval by the King, extended the authorities' already sweeping powers to combat "acts of terror". The new law defines terrorist acts in vague and overly broad terms that can and are currently used to crackdown on peaceful dissent including human rights defenders.

Saudi Arabia's representatives at the Human Rights Council in Geneva have continually blocked civil society associations from raising cases of human rights violations at the Council. The Saudi Arabian authorities use censorship to prevent independent media reporting on the domestic human rights situation. They also use their influence and financial clout to prompt national and pan-Arab media outlets to condemn independent organizations and reports criticizing on-going violations inside the country, and in turn made use of those media outlets to depict a rosy picture of the country's human rights situation. Earlier this month the authorities confiscated issue #46 of the US magazine *Newsweek*, which contained a critical report on the latest surge in executions in the country, including of those who were executed after grossly unfair trials.