

Saudi Arabia: Over 50 human rights groups call for immediate release of women's rights defenders

1 March 2019

The following letter was sent to over 30 Ministers of Foreign Affairs of States calling on UN Member States to adopt a resolution at the 40th session of the UN Human Rights Council calling explicitly for the immediate and unconditional release of the detained Saudi women human rights defenders and establishing a monitoring mechanism over the human rights violations in the country.

19 February 2019

Stand up for human rights in Saudi Arabia and demand the immediate and unconditional release of Saudi women human rights defenders

Your Excellency,

The extrajudicial execution of the Saudi Washington Post columnist, Jamal Khashoggi, has increased public scrutiny of the repressive environment that exists for human rights defenders in Saudi Arabia. These defenders have bravely denounced human rights violations, including gender discrimination, for years and have paid a hefty personal price.

We welcome the decision by some countries, including Denmark, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway and Switzerland, to halt arms deals with Saudi Arabia. Some of our organisations have been calling for halting of arms sales as there is a real risk that they will be used in the perpetration of crimes under international law or other serious human rights violations in Yemen. We call on all other countries to end all such arms deals and exports to Saudi Arabia.

We are gravely concerned by the reports of torture and ill-treatment of detained women's rights defenders in Saudi Arabia. They have been imprisoned since mid-2018 solely for peacefully campaigning for the protection and promotion of human rights, including women's rights, in the Kingdom. Some were detained incommunicado with no access to their families or lawyers during the first three months of their detention and subjected to chilling [smear campaigns](#) by State media. They all remain without access to legal representation.

Recent [reports](#) have emerged that some of the detained women activists were subjected to electric shocks, flogging, sexual threats and other forms of torture. Testimonies recount that this abuse has left some of the women unable to walk or stand properly with uncontrolled shaking and marks on their bodies. At least one of them has attempted suicide multiple times.

Detained women's rights defenders include Loujain Al-Hathloul, Aziza Al-Yousef, Eman Al-Nafjan, Nouf Abdelaziz, Dr. Hatoon Al-Fassi, Samar Badawi, Nassima Al-Sadah, Mohammed

Al-Bajadi, Amal Al-Harbiⁱ, and Shadan Al-Anezi. They have been long advocating for Saudi women's right to drive, have called for an end to the discriminatory male guardianship system and have peacefully campaigned for greater respect for human rights. For this, they risk being tried and sentenced before the Specialised Criminal Court, the country's counter-terrorism court.

In 2016, the United Nations Committee Against Torture, in its second periodic report of Saudi Arabia, expressed concern at the application of terrorism legislation, through the Specialized Criminal Court, which enables the criminalisation of acts of peaceful expression considered as "endangering national unity" or "undermining the reputation or position of the State."ⁱⁱ These regulations have been used to try human rights defenders for exercising their fundamental rights, violate international standards for the right to a fair trial, and have enabled authorities to detain individuals without providing them with access to legal representation during the investigation phase. As further recommended by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in March 2018, the Saudi State should facilitate women's access to justice and institutionalise legal aid that is accessible, sustainable and responsive to the needs of women.ⁱⁱⁱ

Saudi Arabia, as a member of the UN Human Rights Council, is obligated to uphold the highest standards for the promotion and protection of human rights and to cooperate fully with the Council's mechanisms. However, the Saudi government has been largely uncooperative with the Council and continues to exhibit a flagrant disregard for fundamental freedoms. Despite critical engagement from the Council's mechanisms^{iv}, Saudi Arabia continues to implement its systematic policy of reprisal and intimidation against those engaging or seeking to engage with the UN^v and further imprisoned human rights defenders, women's rights activists and dissidents. While Saudi Arabia has been scrutinized by the Council's mechanisms, it has become evident that further action must be taken by the world's top human rights body for any meaningful reform to occur.

We therefore urge you to take advantage of this moment, and take action at the upcoming session of the Human Rights Council, to convey to Saudi Arabia that business as usual will no longer be the rule. We urge you to initiate Council action by presenting a resolution at the 40th session of the Council establishing a monitoring mechanism over the human rights violations in the country and calling explicitly for the immediate and unconditional release of the detained Saudi women human rights defenders and to drop all charges against them.

Please rest assured, your Excellency, of our highest consideration.

Sincerely,

1. Access Now
2. Association Marocaine de lutte contre la Violence à L'égard des Femmes (AMVEF)
3. Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain
4. Amnesty International
5. ALQST
6. Arab Institute for Human Rights
7. Arab Women Organisation of Jordan

8. Arabic Network for Human Rights Information
9. ARTICLE 19
10. Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA)
11. Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID)
12. Beity Association
13. Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies
14. CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation
15. Committee for Justice
16. Committee for the Respect of Liberties and Human Rights in Tunisia
17. Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative
18. DefendDefenders (East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project)
19. English PEN
20. Equality Now
21. European Saudi Organisation for Human Rights
22. Euromed Feminist Initiative
23. Fédération de la Ligue Démocratique des Droits des Femmes
24. FIDH, under the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders
25. Front Line Defenders
26. Global Fund for Women
27. Gulf Centre for Human Rights
28. Human Rights Law Centre
29. Human Rights Watch
30. International Service for Human Rights
31. Iraqi Women League
32. Jossour Forum des Femmes Marocaines
33. Lawyer's Rights Watch Canada
34. Lebanese Council to Resist Violence Against Women
35. MENA Rights Group
36. MENA Women Human Rights Defenders Coalition
37. Mwatana Organization for Human Rights
38. Najdah Lebanon
39. PEN International
40. Scholars at Risk
41. The Legal Agenda-Tunis
42. The Right Livelihood Award Foundation
43. Tunis Center for Press Freedom
44. Tunisian Association for Democratic Women (ATFD)
45. Tunisian Association for Individual Liberties
46. Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights (FTDES)
47. Union de l'action Feministe (UFA)

48. Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights
49. Vigilance for Democracy and the Civic State
50. Women's March Global
51. Women's Study Center
52. World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT), under the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders

ⁱ Amal Harbi is also the wife of founding member of the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association (ACPRA) Fawzan Harbi.

ⁱⁱ CAT [Concluding Observations](#) on the second periodic report of Saudi Arabia, 8 June 2016

ⁱⁱⁱ CEDAW [Concluding observations](#) on the combined third and fourth periodic reports of Saudi Arabia, 9 March 2018

^{iv} Nine communications have been made public from 1 June 2018 to 30 November 2018, and it has also come under scrutiny during the UPR in November 2018. See for example Urgent Appeal [sent](#) from Special Procedures in October (SAU 11/2018) specifically concerning the widespread and systematic arrest and detention of women human rights defenders in Saudi Arabia. In addition, the High Commissioner also [released](#) several statements calling for the release of the defenders.

^v Saudi Arabia has been consistently cited in the Secretary General's [annual reprisals report](#) since 2013.