

Activism is not terrorism: Free Saudi Activists Coalition condemns the sentencing of Saudi women's rights defender Loujain Al-Hathloul

Today, Saudi Arabia's Specialised Criminal Court sentenced Saudi women's human rights defender Loujain Al-Hathloul to 5 years and 8 months in prison. The sentence includes a suspension of 2 years and 10 months in addition to the time already served (since May 2018) which would see Loujain's release in March 2021. Loujain is also required to serve three years of probation during which time she could be arrested for any perceived illegal activity. She will also be placed on a 5-year travel ban.

Loujain Al-Hathloul, a leading figure of the Saudi women's rights movement, was detained in May 2018, and her case was transferred to the Specialised Criminal Court on 25 November 2020.

According to a 2019 report by the American Bar Association, the Saudi Specialised Criminal Court has been used to target human rights activists and '[routinely convicts individuals of terrorism charges without any meaningful evidence](#)'.

On 15 May 2018, the Saudi government began a campaign of arrests of Saudi Women's Human Rights Defenders. Whilst five of the women human rights defenders detained in 2018 have been provisionally released, Loujain Al-Hathloul, Nouf Abdulaziz, Samar Badawi, Nassima Al-Sadah, Mohammed Al-Bajadi, and Miyaa Al-Zahrani remain in detention.

During their detention, there have been [multiple reports](#) that the women human rights defenders have been tortured, including being electrocuted, waterboarded, and sexually assaulted.

According to a website set up by Loujain's family, [Saud al-Qahtani, a top royal adviser, was present several times when Loujain was tortured](#). Loujain told her family that sometimes al-Qahtani laughed at her, sometimes he threatened to rape and kill her and throw her body into the sewage system.

The absurd charges against Loujain include calling for the end of the oppressive male guardianship system, contacting international organizations, speaking about her detention, supporting Saudi human rights movements, and applying for a job with the United Nations.

Speaking at the United Nations Human Rights Council in 2019, [Lina AlHathloul, Loujain's sister, said](#):

"Loujain was imprisoned for promoting the implementation of the Vienna Declaration, which affirms the full and equal enjoyment by women of all human rights. Loujain did not get to drive in her hometown of Riyadh because she was arrested right before the Saudi government lifted the driving ban for women.

"Loujain did not get to travel without needing to get permission from her male guardian: a right she has fought for, not for herself, but for others.

People's right to protect and promote the human rights of others is protected under international human rights law. Despite this, too often human rights defenders face violence and imprisonment, simply for taking a stand for equality and human rights. Loujain's activism is not terrorism.

Saudi Arabia must be held accountable for these human rights violations. Suad Abu Dayyeh, Gender Advisor at international women's rights organization Equality Now, said,

“Saudi Arabia is obligated to uphold international human rights standards and this includes ending the unlawful detainment and persecution of women's rights activists. Peacefully advocating for gender equality must never be treated as a crime and Saudi Arabia's citizens should be free to exercise their civil rights without fear of intimidation, torture, or arrest.”

The Free Saudi Activists Coalition condemns today's verdict and urges governments around the world, including the incoming Biden/Harris Administration, to hold Saudi Arabia accountable for their continued disregard for human rights and call for the immediate and unconditional release of Loujain AlHathloul and all Saudi Activists and Women's Human Rights Defenders.

ENDS

Notes to Editors:

The Free Saudi Activists Coalition consists of [Equality Now](#), [Women's March Global](#), [International Service for Human Rights \(ISHR\)](#), [Americans for Democracy & Human Rights Bahrain \(ADHRB\)](#), [Gulf Centre for Human Rights \(GCHR\)](#) and [CIVICUS](#),

Specialised Criminal Court (SCC) Timeline:

- 24 Nov 2020 - Saudi officials notified the family that Loujain's trial would commence on 25 Nov 2020. Loujain's parents are her legal representatives for the case, they had one day to prepare for the trial.
- 25 Nov 2020 - Loujain's case was transferred to the Specialised Criminal Court (known as the Terrorism court) and the court has said it will open an investigation with the prosecution regarding torture. Loujain gave more information regarding her hunger strike (see below)
- 9 Dec 2020 - Saudi officials notified the family in the evening (with less than 24 hours notice) that Loujain's first trial session at the Specialised Criminal Court would be held the following day 10 Dec
- 1st Trial Session - 10 Dec 2020 - The prosecution called for a maximum sentence for Loujain and changed the charges without permission or notification. All charges and changes can be seen here: <https://www.loujainalhathloul.org/arrest-torture-charges#trial>

- 2nd Trial Session - 14 Dec 2020 - Loujain appeared for her second trial appearance at the Specialised Criminal Court. Loujain handed in her defense and was given the evidence against her by the prosecution which include:
 - Tweets about her involvement in the #Women2Drive campaign
 - Contacting Amnesty International to speak about the situation of activists in Saudi Arabia
 - Audio recordings of Loujain speaking about the male guardianship system.
- 3rd Trial Session - 16 December 2020 - The judge said that he will compare Loujain's defense and the prosecutor's response. This is the first time the judge says this comparison will be done.
- Criminal Court Hearing - 17 Dec 2020 - During the hearing, Loujain and her father were briefed on a secret report on the torture of Loujain. In their summary the Public Prosecution denied the torture charges brought by Loujain, and said that prison cameras do not store photos for more than 40 days.
- 4th Trial Session - 21 December 2020 - The SCC judge said that they are waiting for the final torture report from the criminal court (a criminal court hearing took place on 17 Dec - see timeline below) and fixed a new date for a hearing to be held on Thursday 24 Dec 2020. An additional session at the criminal court (regular court) in regards to the torture investigation is scheduled for Tuesday 22 Dec 2020.
- Criminal Court Hearing - 22 December 2020 - During Loujain's hearing at the criminal court, the judge gave her a secret report concluding the "investigation" regarding her torture. He asked her to give her response to the report on the same day. He then sent his final report (in which he denies torture) to the SCC.
- 5th Trial Session - 24 Dec 2020 - The SCC judge delayed the next hearing until Monday 28 Dec 2020 and notified Loujain and her family in court.
- 6th Trial Session - 28 Dec 2020 - Loujain AlHathloul a leading Saudi women's rights activist was sentenced to 5 years and 8 months in prison in court by the Specialised Criminal Court (terrorism court). The sentence includes a suspension of 2 years and 10 months in addition to the time already served (since May 2018) which would see Loujain's release in approximately three months. Loujain is also required to serve three years of probation during which time she could be arrested for any perceived illegal activity. She will also be placed on a 5 year travel ban.