

## Human Rights Defenders and Political Prisoners in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain

### Abdulrahman Al Hamid: Civil Society Leader Imprisoned in Saudi Arabia

Abdulrahman Al Hamid is a political prisoner in Saudi Arabia. He is a founding member of the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association (ACPRA) and served as the organization's first president when it was founded in 2009. In 2015, he was sentenced to nine years in prison followed by a nine-year travel ban, on politicized charges related to his work as a civil society leader.

Al Hamid was arrested by Saudi authorities in 2014, days after he and other activists signed a statement calling for the Minister of Interior to be put on trial "for his policy in suppressing public freedoms." In October 2015 he was convicted of vague offences including "incitement against public order" and "spreading chaos" for taking part in drafting and publishing a statement that called for reform. Abdulrahman Al Hamid is the ninth of ACPRA's founding members to be sent to prison since 2012.

#### **CLOSING CIVIL SOCIETY SPACE IN SAUDI ARABIA**

The imprisonment of ACPRA members including Abdulrahman Al Hamid is indicative of Saudi Arabia's widespread crackdown on civil society organizations. Saudi Arabia has historically severely restricted space for civil society to undertake legitimate activities. Associations must be registered with and approved by the government in order to operate legally. But in the years following the regional pro-democracy protests in 2011, Saudi authorities have increased their restrictions on civil society activists and human rights defenders.



Before it was shut down by authorities in 2013, ACPRA was Saudi Arabia's leading independent human rights NGO. Though unable to obtain an official registration in Saudi Arabia, ACPRA reported on human rights violations and helped families of detainees held without charge to bring cases against the Ministry of Interior before the Board of Grievances (an administrative court with jurisdiction to consider complaints against the state).

Though ACPRA is no longer able to operate, Saudi authorities continue to target those associated with the organization. Authorities use the country's revised 2014 anti-terror law to target human rights defenders and peaceful dissidents, such as Abdulrahman Al Hamid and his colleagues. Under the new anti-terror law, ACPRA members have had their trials reopened years after they were originally sentenced. They have also been subjected to duplicative charges under the anti-terror law while

already serving sentences on the same charges under other laws or by different courts.

**THE U.S. APPROACH TO HUMAN RIGHTS AND COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM**

Saudi Arabia has been a regional leader in suppressing the public’s demands for more representative government and a more open society. This type of repression closes space for nonviolent debate and peaceful expressions of discontent, and fuels grievances that may be exploited by violent extremists.

U.S. officials should publicly urge the immediate release of civil society leaders unjustly imprisoned in Saudi Arabia and call for the lifting of restrictions on legitimate, nonviolent human rights advocacy. Since President Obama has characterized support for civil society a “matter of national security” and announced that support for civil society will be a “mission across the U.S. government,” the U.S. agenda for its bilateral meetings should include concern for restrictions imposed on civil society.