

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

Waleed Abu al-Khair: Imprisoned in Saudi Arabia on Politicized Charges

Waleed Abu al-Khair is a Saudi attorney and human rights defender and the head of the Saudi Arabia Monitor of Human Rights, an independent human rights organization founded in 2008. Since 2014, he has been imprisoned on charges under the Kingdom's sweeping terrorism law. He faces 15 years behind bars for criticizing human rights abuses in Saudi Arabia in statements to the press and on social media.

Even prior to this long prison sentence, Waleed Abu al-Khair faced harassment, travel bans, and frivolous prosecution due to his human rights work. In 2013, he was subject to multiple criminal proceedings based on charges such as “offending the judiciary” and “inciting international organizations against the Kingdom,” reportedly for signing a petition that criticized the Saudi Arabian authorities’ repressive tactics in dealing with nonviolent government critics.

Despite the Saudi government’s efforts to silence him, his imprisonment has lent further visibility to his cause. In November 2015, Waleed Abu al-Khair was awarded the Ludovic-Trarieux Human Rights Award, which his attorney accepted on his behalf. The award recognizes “those who defend the supremacy of law.” A United Nations expert body has classified his detention as arbitrary, and human rights organizations have persistently called for his immediate, unconditional release.



THE MISUSE OF COUNTER-TERRORISM LAWS AND DENIAL OF FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION IN SAUDI ARABIA

Waleed Abu al-Khair’s case illustrates how Saudi Arabia manipulates vague and overbroad counter-terrorism laws in order to intimidate and silence individuals engaged in legitimate human rights work, and to restrict basic rights and freedoms. By subjecting activists such as Waleed Abu al-Khair to long prison sentences on politicized and arbitrary charges, the Saudi government stifles those who seek to raise awareness about its repressive practices.

When governments target human rights lawyers, the rule of law is undermined. In the face of a system in which due process is routinely denied, human rights defenders rely on legal support. Waleed Abu al-Khair is exactly the kind of courageous lawyer that the Saudi people need to be out of prison and advocating for the rights of others.

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

The United States, in its initiatives to counter violent extremism, has acknowledged the central importance of respect for human rights and the rule of law. In remarks and high-level gatherings, senior U.S. officials have repeatedly highlighted the importance of freedom of expression and peaceful pathways for those with legitimate concerns to express their grievances. Yet the United States has declined to publicly call out Saudi Arabia's human rights abuses and targeting of civil society leaders and advocates in bilateral dialogues.

Waleed Abu al-Khair should have never been imprisoned in the first place. In 2014, a State Department spokesperson said they were "troubled" by his sentence, and urged the Saudi government to "respect international human rights norms, a point we make to them regularly." By calling publicly for his immediate release and for all charges and penalties to be dropped, the United States would demonstrate its commitment to applying principles it has articulated and advocated for as part of efforts to counter violent extremism.

Stifling civil society and curbing free expression will not contribute to stability and security in the region.