

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

Raif Badawi: Saudi Blogger Imprisoned and Sentenced to 1,000 Lashes

Raif Badawi is a Saudi blogger who was sentenced to ten years in prison and 1,000 lashes for publishing a liberal blog. As a blogger, Badawi exercised his right to freedom of expression in a highly restrictive environment. He criticized the role of religious hardliners in Saudi politics and advocated for the separation of religion and politics. He described himself as a liberal and criticized those who claim to hold a monopoly on the truth, spreading what he described as a culture of death and ignorance.

Badawi was arrested in 2012 after religious hardliners issued fatwas against him describing him as an apostate. He has been convicted on several charges including insulting Islam. He was subjected to the first 50 lashes in early 2015, which sparked an international outcry. In December 2015, Badawi was transferred to an isolated prison and went on a hunger strike in protest. His wife and three children live in exile in Canada.

Raif Badawi has been awarded multiple prestigious international prizes, including the International Publishers Association's Prix Voltaire in April 2016, and awarded the European Parliament's Sakharov Prize for human rights in 2015.

DENIAL OF FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION IN SAUDI ARABIA

The Saudi government has resorted to long prison sentences on politicized and trumped-up charges in



order to stifle dissent, including peaceful criticism of the government and religious authorities.

When peaceful expressions of dissent are met with politicized charges, long prison sentences, and inhumane cruelty, these measures cast a long shadow over those who wish to exercise their basic rights and freedoms.

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

One prominent component of the U.S. government's approach to countering violent extremism (CVE) is implementing social media messaging strategies. Working with partners and allies, including in the Middle East, the United States seeks to counter extremist narratives and raise the voices of those opposed to extremist violence. Raif Badawi has been an outspoken critic of extremist interpretations of religion, and his support for values of tolerance,

non-violence, and religious freedom have made him a target of extremists.

It is extremely troubling that the Saudi government, which claims to be an ally and partner in the multilateral effort to counter violent extremism, is actively engaged in suppressing and punishing those, like Raif Badawi, who speak out against violent extremism.

Consistent with the CVE strategy it has championed, the United States should do more to support independent civil society, bloggers, journalists, and human rights activists in Saudi Arabia. Where those who speak out against extremism are incarcerated and brutalized, the U.S. government should persistently call for their release. The State Department called on the Saudi authorities in January 2015 to “cancel” Badawi’s punishment of 1,000 lashes, calling it “brutal” and “inhumane,” and urged the Saudi government to “review Badawi’s case and sentence.” In March 2015, sixty-seven members of Congress sent a bipartisan letter to the King of Saudi Arabia calling for the release of all political prisoners, including Raif Badawi and his attorney, Waleed Abu al-Khair.

The U.S. government should sustain these efforts. Ultimately, mutual interests in security and stability in the region will be better achieved if governments, including Saudi Arabia, create space for their citizens to engage in peaceful dissent and debate and to challenge extremist ideologies.