

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

July 30, 2024

The Honorable Joseph R. Biden, Jr.
President of the United States
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

The Honorable Antony Blinken
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington D.C. 20520

Dear President Biden and Secretary Blinken,

Five years after the grisly murder and dismemberment of Jamal Khashoggi, which was ordered by Saudi authorities,¹ we are profoundly troubled by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's continuing crackdown on freedom of expression and are very worried about the fate of numerous people unfairly tried and incarcerated in the Kingdom.² Dozens of human rights defenders and women's rights advocates, some of whom are family members of United States citizens, have been incarcerated simply for exercising their rights to freedom of expression and association. Further, the Kingdom has imposed a travel ban on many of these individuals following the end of their prison sentences, which is another egregious human rights violation.

No human being should spend a day—much less 27 years or 45 years—behind bars because of words he or she has spoken. The cases below result from the Kingdom's draconian zero-tolerance policy for critical political thought and dissent, and we urge you to press immediately for these individuals' unconditional release.

- Mohammad al-Qahtani, an academic, graduate of Indiana University, and father of four U.S. citizens, is a disappeared person in Saudi Arabia.³ He was sentenced to 10 years in

¹ Julian E. Barnes and David E. Sanger, *Saudi Crown Prince Is Held Responsible for Khashoggi Killing in U.S. Report*, NY TIMES (Updated July 17, 2021), <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/26/us/politics/jamal-khashoggi-killing-cia-report.html>.

² *Saudi Arabia 2023*, AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL, (last visited May 15, 2024), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/middle-east-and-north-africa/middle-east/saudi-arabia/report-saudi-arabia/>.

³ “*Our ray of light*” – *my husband, a jailed activist in Saudi Arabia*, AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL, (October 28, 2016), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2016/10/mohammad-al-qahtani-acpra-saudi-arabia/>.

prison in 2013 for his human rights work and for co-founding the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association, an independent human rights organization.⁴ Al-Qahtani's sentence expired in November 2022 but instead of being released, he was forcibly disappeared.⁵ His family is unable to contact him and despite their repeated inquiries through official channels, they have not been informed of his whereabouts or the state of his health for nearly two years.

- Abdulrahman al-Sadhan, a Red Crescent worker and brother of U.S. citizen and California resident Areej al-Sadhan, is serving a 20-year prison sentence followed by a 20-year travel ban for nothing more than posting anonymous satirical social media statements. He has been imprisoned since 2018 and has also been forcibly disappeared.⁶ The last time his family was able to speak with him was in 2021, when it was apparent that Abdulrahman had been tortured. His family has not heard from him since. As the Department of State notes, freedom of expression should never be a punishable offense,⁷ much less a capital one.

Al-Qahtani and al-Sadhan were tried before the Specialized Criminal Court (SCC), which was set up to try terror-related crimes but instead has been used to crack down on activists, human rights defenders, journalists, religious clerics, and other innocent citizens. In the last two years, the SCC has handed out harsh sentences, some as long as 45 years, after flagrantly unjust trials of citizens who have merely expressed themselves politically or criticized the authorities.

- In 2022, the SCC extended Noura al-Qahtani's prison sentence from 13 years to 45 years, which is believed to be the longest sentence ever imposed for online expression.⁸ The court also imposed a 45-year travel ban upon her release. Ms. al-Qahtani had fewer than 650 Twitter followers but was nonetheless accused of "using the Internet to tear the social fabric" and "violating the public order by using social media" under the country's expansive and vague counterterrorism and anti-cybercrime laws.⁹ In response to a video from the Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs saying that the Kingdom believes in interfaith dialogue, in June 2021 Ms. al-Qahtani tweeted, "[w]e hope for freedom that allows us to

⁴ "ACPRO trials" come to an end, with sentences totaling 199 years in prison terms and travel bans as well as other punishments, ALQST FOR HUMAN RIGHTS, (last visited May 15, 2024), <https://www.alqst.org/ar/posts/360>.

⁵ Saudi Arabia: Joint Statement on Enforced Disappearance of Mohammed al-Qahtani, AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL, (November 24, 2022), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde23/6242/2022/en/>.

⁶ Aya Batrawy, *Saudi case against Twitter user may have its roots in US*, AP NEWS, (August 5, 2021), <https://apnews.com/article/technology-joe-biden-middle-east-business-jamal-khashoggi-6d2ee8dcffd7140928948886d8df33d1>.

⁷ *The Sentencing of Saudi Humanitarian Aid Worker Abdulrahman al-Sadhan*, UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF STATE, <https://www.state.gov/the-sentencing-of-saudi-humanitarian-aid-worker-abdulrahman-al-sadhan/>.

⁸ Stephanie Kirchaessner, *Revealed: jailed Saudi woman was convicted of 'spreading lies through tweets'*, THE GUARDIAN, (September 6, 2022), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/sep/06/revealed-jailed-saudi-woman-was-convicted-of-spreading-lies-through-tweets>.

⁹ David Gritten, *Nourah al-Qahtani: Saudi woman jailed for 45 years for social media posts*, BBC NEWS, (August 31, 2022), <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-62736118>.

choose our [government] system and who governs this country as we see fit.”¹⁰ This hope for freedom of choice will be expressed by more than two billion people around the world this year, as at least 64 countries hold national elections.¹¹ And yet, today this mother of five is in prison for 45 years in Saudi Arabia because she dared to express her hopes for democracy.

- Sheikh Salman Alodah, a prominent reformist cleric who is the father of a U.S. permanent resident and the grandfather of a U.S. citizen, has been detained since 2017 after posting a social media statement encouraging Saudi and Qatari authorities to end their diplomatic stand-off with a prayer for “a softening of hearts.” Since 2018, he has been on trial before the SCC on charges related to the exercise of his right to free speech. Shockingly, the prosecution has demanded that he be sentenced to death.¹²
- Waleed Abu al-Khair is a prominent human rights defender serving a 15-year prison sentence followed by a 15-year travel ban for his refusal to stop his advocacy. In 2014, he became one of the first activists to be tried and sentenced under Saudi Arabia’s draconian Counter-Terrorism Law. Mr. Abu al-Khair founded the Monitor of Human Rights in Saudi Arabia (MHRSA) and spent much of his life advocating for democratic reforms. Prior to his arrest, he provided legal representation for victims of human rights abuses. The charges against him included “inciting public opinion against the State and its people;” “inciting international organisations against Saudi Arabia with the intention of ruining its reputation;” and “setting up and supervising an unlicensed association,” namely the MHRSA; which he registered in Ontario, Canada after it was denied a license in the Kingdom.¹³ A related case is that of the blogger Raif Badawi, who was represented by Mr. Abu al-Khair. Mr. Badawi was subject to public flogging and served ten years in prison from 2012 to 2022 following dubious charges. Mr. Badawi remains subject to a travel ban and is unable to reunite with his family in Canada.¹⁴
- Salma al-Shehab, a PhD student and mother of two, was arrested in 2021 and is currently sentenced to 27 years in prison followed by a 27-year travel ban solely for expressing support for prisoners of conscience, including imprisoned women’s rights activists, and calling for an end to male guardianship.¹⁵ Her social media statements such as "Freedom for women imprisoned in patriarchal regimes and shame on the prison guards!" and the

¹⁰ TWITTER (X), (last visited May 22, 2024), <https://x.com/Najma097/status/1407332694401425411>.

¹¹ Koh Ewe, *Elections Around the World in 2024*, TIME, (December 28, 2023), <https://time.com/6550920/world-elections-2024/>.

¹² *My Father Faces the Death Penalty. This Is Justice in Saudi Arabia*, NY TIMES, (February 13, 2019), <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/13/opinion/saudi-arabia-judiciary.html>.

¹³ *Ten years after his arbitrary arrest, NGOs call for Saudi human rights defender Waleed Abu al-Khair to be released*, FREEDOM HOUSE, (April 15, 2024), <https://freedomhouse.org/article/ten-years-after-his-arbitrary-arrest-ngos-call-saudi-human-rights-defender-waleed-abu-al>.

¹⁴ *Raif Badawi: Saudi blogger freed after decade in prison*, BBC News, (March 11, 2022), <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-60714086>

hashtag "dismantle the remnants of the male guardianship system"¹⁶ are classic political speech and not crimes that should land someone in prison for 27 years.

- In April 2024, human rights organizations learned that the SCC secretly sentenced 30-year-old fitness influencer and women's rights activist Manahel al-Otaibi to 11 years in prison. She received this harsh sentence solely due to her choice of clothing – not wearing an abaya (traditional dress) – and her online expression, including calling for an end to Saudi Arabia's male guardianship system.¹⁷

These unjustly incarcerated citizens of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia have endured, along with their families, years of heartbreak and anguish at the hands of this theocratic police state. Many others know that same struggle but have been silenced through violent intimidation, travel bans, and the fear of reprisals against their loved ones.¹⁸ This reign of terror in Saudi Arabia must end and the people must be granted internationally recognized basic human rights. The Kingdom must fulfill the promises it made in its "Vision 2030" to become a "tolerant" country and a "vibrant" society, which it can only do by respecting the rights of its citizens.¹⁹

The principles of freedom of expression and association, and legal due process, must be respected by Saudi Arabia. As champions of prisoners of conscience and hostages all over the world seeking their release from captivity, we strongly urge you to prioritize the immediate and unconditional release of these detainees and all others wrongfully imprisoned in Saudi Arabia. Their release would be a vital step toward upholding these values. Thank you for your prompt attention to this urgent matter.

Sincerely,



Jamie Raskin
Member of Congress



Donald S. Beyer Jr.
Member of Congress

¹⁵ *Emblematic Cases of Political Prisoners: Salma al-Shehab*, FREEDOM HOUSE, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/free-them-all?name=salma-al-shehab>.

¹⁶ TWITTER (X), (last visited May 29, 2024), https://x.com/I_Salma1988/status/1343718552759652352.

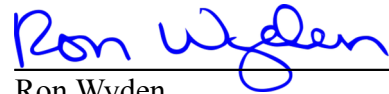
¹⁷ *Saudi Arabia: Further Information: Manahel al-Otaibi Beaten in Detention*, AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL, (April 23, 2024), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde23/7977/2024/en/>.

¹⁸ See *ACPR trials*, supra note 4.

¹⁹ *Saudi Vision 2030*, (last visited May 15, 2024), <https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/en/>.



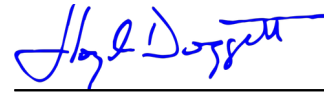
Adam B. Schiff
Member of Congress



Ron Wyden
United States Senator



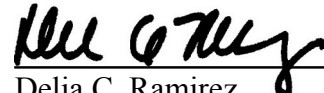
Andre Carson
Member of Congress



Lloyd Doggett
Member of Congress



Eleanor Holmes Norton
Member of Congress



Delia C. Ramirez
Member of Congress



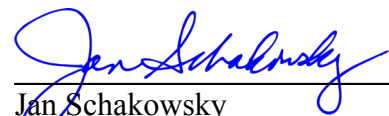
Rashida Tlaib
Member of Congress



Barbara Lee
Member of Congress



Dina Titus
Member of Congress



Jan Schakowsky
Member of Congress



Peter Welch
United States Senator



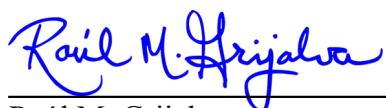
Tim Kaine
United States Senator



Bernard Sanders
United States Senator



James P. McGovern
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Raúl M. Grijalva
Member of Congress



Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez
Member of Congress



David J. Trone
Member of Congress



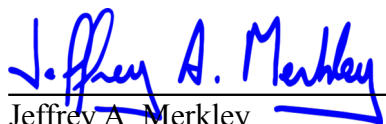
Richard Blumenthal
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Mike Quigley
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Robert Garcia
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Jeffrey A. Merkley
United States Senator



Cori Bush
Member of Congress



Anna G. Eshoo
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Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator



Richard J. Durbin
United States Senator



Gerald E. Connolly
Member of Congress



Rosa L. DeLauro
Member of Congress



Mazie K. Hirono
United States Senator

Edward J. Markey

Edward J. Markey
United States Senator

Greg Casar

Greg Casar
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