

THE KINGDOM'S CAPTIVES: SAUDI ARABIA'S PRISONER RELEASES AND THOSE LEFT BEHIND



MEDC
Middle East
Democracy Center

April 2025 // Abdullah Alaoudh, Sheridan Cole, Haydn Welch

Since late 2024, MEDC has documented the cases of 48 unjustly detained individuals, including prominent human rights defenders, that have been released from prison in Saudi Arabia. The total number of releases could be as many as 1,000, credible sources tell MEDC. While long overdue, these releases mark a significant step toward reversing an unprecedented crackdown on Saudis exercising their fundamental freedoms. However, hundreds, most likely **thousands**, remain behind bars in politically motivated cases, including some of the kingdom's leading activists, academics, and advocates for reform. This fact sheet documents both the recent releases and those who continue to face prolonged detention without due process.



PROMINENT RELEASES



MOHAMMED AL-QAHTANI, the father of four U.S. citizens and a renowned Saudi human rights defender, was detained in 2012 and sentenced to ten years in prison for co-founding the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association (ACPRA). In 2022, when his 10-year prison sentence was completed, he was forcibly disappeared instead of being released. Members of Congress **called** for his release in 2024. Finally, after 2 years of enforced disappearance, Mohammed was released on January 7, 2025, but was placed on travel ban.



SALMA AL-SHEHAB, a PhD student at Leeds University in the U.K. and mother of two, was detained in 2021 for social media posts in defense of human rights activists. Initially sentenced to 6 years in prison, in August 2022, Salma's sentence was increased to an unfathomable 34 years. Six months later, it was reduced to 27 years, and then finally reduced to 4 years in September 2024, following international outcry and **Members of Congress repeatedly raising** her case. In February 2025, Salma was released from prison but was placed on travel ban.



MALIK AL-AHMED, a well-known journalist, author, and academic, was unjustly **detained** in September 2017. During his detention, he was **subjected** to enforced disappearance, solitary confinement, and often denied contact with a lawyer and his family. In late 2024, Malik was released after more than 7 years in prison and placed on travel ban.

Other releases in recent months include Saudi human rights defender **Essa al-Nukheifi**; teacher **Asaad al-Ghamdi**; media influencer **Mansour al-Raqiba**; blogger **Ahmed al-Budaiwi**; nurse **Zeinab al-Rabea**; academic **Mohammed al-Khudairi**; businessman **Jamil Farsi**; author **Abdullah al-Maliki**; news anchor **Fahad al-Sunaidi**; media figure and podcaster **Hatem al-Najjar**; activist **Abdulaziz al-Odah**; doctor **Abdulmohsen al-Ahmad**; and blogger **Fatima al-Shawarb**.

THOSE LEFT BEHIND

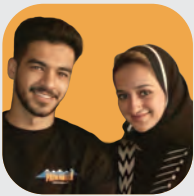
*Despite these releases, hundreds, most likely **thousands**, remain unjustly detained in Saudi Arabia and should be immediately and unconditionally released. Some of these prisoners include:*



ABDULRAHMAN AL-SADHAN, a Saudi humanitarian aid worker and family member of three U.S. citizens, was **arrested** in March 2018, forcibly disappeared, and severely tortured over satirical social media posts. In 2021, he was sentenced to 20 years in prison followed by a 20-year travel ban in a secret sham trial. Since 2021, his family has been denied all contact with him.



SALMAN AL-ODAH, a prominent Saudi reformist Islamic scholar and grandfather of a U.S. citizen, was arrested in September 2017 for a social media post in which he called for reconciliation between several Arab states and Qatar. Al-Odah was **held incommunicado** during the first 5 months of his imprisonment. He remains in solitary confinement and has been denied adequate healthcare, causing his health to dramatically deteriorate including losing nearly all vision in one eye. The Saudi prosecutors are seeking the death penalty against him on 37 charges related to free speech and his writings about democracy and revolutions.



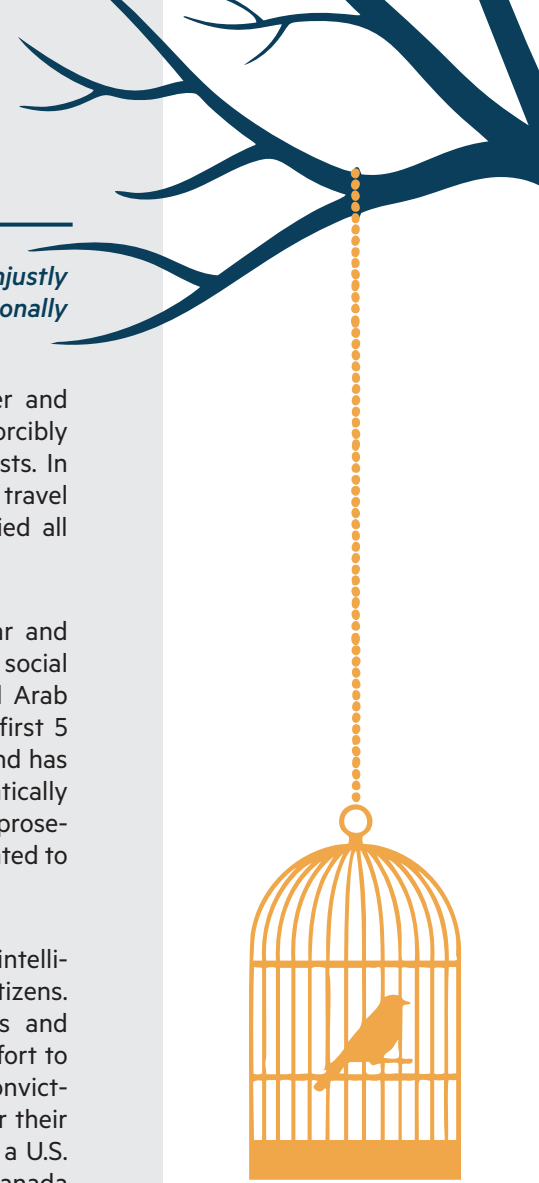
OMAR AND SARAH AL-JABRI, are the children of former Saudi intelligence official Saad al-Jabri and the uncle and aunt of two U.S. citizens. They were taken hostage in March 2020 by Saudi authorities and **sentenced** to 9 years and 6.5 years in prison, respectively, in an effort to force their father to return to Saudi Arabia. Sarah and Omar were convicted of “money laundering” and “attempting to escape” shortly after their father sued Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) in a U.S. federal court, alleging MBS had sent a hit squad to murder him in Canada in 2018. Following their arrest and during their trial, Sarah and Omar were held incommunicado and denied access to their lawyer and family.



MANAHEL AL-OTAIBI, a 30-year-old fitness instructor, was sentenced in January 2024 to 11 years in prison by a Saudi terrorism court for her promotion of women’s rights online. While detained, she has been **subjected** to enforced disappearance, torture, and other ill treatment. She suffers from multiple sclerosis, which has worsened due to medical neglect and torture in prison.



WALID ABU AL-KHAIR, a Saudi human rights lawyer who represented Saudi activist and blogger Raif Badawi, was **sentenced** to 15 years in prison by the Saudi Specialized Criminal Court (SCC) in July 2014. During the fifth session of his trial in April 2014, Abu al-Khair was arrested and **forcibly disappeared** for 4 months. In June 2016, Abu al-Khair went on hunger strike in protest of being subject to physical assaults by prison officials, solitary confinement, medical neglect, and other mistreatment. In **2015** and **2018**, the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention declared his detention arbitrary and called for his immediate release.



Other political prisoners who remain detained include writer and journalist **Turki al-Jasser**, lawyer **Abdulaziz al-Shubaili**, activist **Mohamed al-Bejadi**, scholar **Safar al-Hawali** as well as his children and brother, preacher **Mohamed al-Munajjid**, doctor **Lina al-Sharif**, Imam **Saleh aal-Talib**, cartoonist **Mohammed al-Hazza**, and **Prince Turki bin Abdullah al-Saud**.

