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First UA: 14/24 Index: MDE 23/7646/2024 Saudi Arabia of February 15, 2024

SAUDI ARABIA

SAUDI WOMAN IMPRISONED FOR WOMEN'S RIGHTS TWEETS

On November 16, 2022, Saudi authorities arrested 29-year-old Manahel al-Otaibi. She has been forcibly disappeared since November 2023. She was charged with violating the Anti-Cyber Crime Law due to her tweets in support of women's rights as well as posting photos of herself at the mall without an abaya (a traditional loose-fitting long-sleeved robe) on Snapchat. Her case has been referred from the Criminal Court in Riyadh to the Specialized Criminal Court (SCC), set up to try terrorism-related crimes. The SCC is notorious for carrying out grossly unfair trials and handing out harsh sentences, including the death penalty, for individuals peacefully expressing themselves online. Saudi authorities must immediately and unconditionally release Manahel al-Otaibi and drop the charges against her.

Write to the Saudi Minister of Justice urging him to:

- Order the immediate and unconditional release of Manahel al-Otaibi, as she is being held solely for peacefully exercising her right to freedom of expression.
- Reveal her whereabouts to her family.
- Stop using the SCC to systematically silence human rights activism and freedom of expression and to repeal or substantially amend the counterterrorism and anti-cybercrime laws which criminalize peaceful dissent and enact new laws that are fully compatible with international human rights law.

Write to:

Waleed Mohammed Al Smani
Minister of Justice
Riyadh, Saudi Arabia
Postal Code 11472, P.O. Box 7775
Email: minister-office@moj.gov.sa
Salutation: Your Excellency:

And copy:

Her Excellency Amal Yahya Almoalimi
Ambassador
Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia
201 Sussex Drive
Ottawa, ON K1N 1K6
Tel: (613) 237-4100 Fax: (613) 237-0567
Email: caemb@mofa.gov.sa

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

In March 2018, almost five years prior to Manahel al-Otaibi's arrest, Crown Prince Mohamed bin Salman [stated in a television interview](#) that *"women wear decent, respectful clothing, like men ... This, however, does not particularly specify a black abaya or a black head cover. The decision is entirely left for women to decide what type of decent and respectful attire she chooses to wear."*

Manahel al-Otaibi's case was first heard by the Criminal Court in Riyadh. On January 23, 2023, the Criminal Court ruled that it had no jurisdiction to try this case and referred the case to the Specialized Criminal Court (SCC) in the capital, Riyadh. The SCC has routinely used vague provisions under the anti-cybercrime and counter-terror laws equating peaceful expression with *"terrorism"*. Amnesty International has documented how [every stage of the SCC judicial process](#) is tainted by human rights violations.

Both of Manahel al-Otaibi's sisters have also faced charges related to their campaigning for women's rights. In the same case against Manahel submitted by the public prosecution to the Riyadh Criminal Court, the Public Prosecutor accused her sister Fawzia of leading *"a propaganda campaign to incite Saudi girls to denounce religious principles and rebel against customs and traditions in the Saudi culture"* and using a hashtag *"which promotes liberation and the fall of male guardianship"*. The court document, reviewed by Amnesty International, states that a separate order would be issued for Fawzia's arrest. Their other sister Mariam, a prominent campaigner against male guardianship in the Kingdom, has previously been charged and detained for her women's rights activism and is currently under travel ban.

In a similar case to Manahel al-Otaibi's, on January 25, 2023, the Specialized Criminal Court (SCC) resentedenced Salma al-Shehab, a Leeds University PhD student and mother of two, to 27 years in prison, followed by a 27-year travel ban upon appeal. The SCC convicted Salma al-Shehab of terrorism-related offences after a grossly unfair trial for publishing tweets in support of women's rights.

As of mid-2021, nearly all human rights defenders, women's rights activists, independent journalists, writers and activists in the country had been arbitrarily detained, put through prolonged and unfair trials – most often by the SCC – or released but under conditions that include travel bans and other arbitrary restrictions to their fundamental rights, such as to conduct peaceful activism.

As of January 2024, Amnesty International has documented the cases of 69 individuals who had been prosecuted for exercising their rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly, including human rights defenders, peaceful political activists, journalists, poets and clerics. Of those, 32 were prosecuted for peacefully expressing their opinions on social media. Amnesty International is aware that the real number of such prosecutions is likely much higher.

Please take action as soon as possible until April 11, 2024! The UA will be duly updated should there be the need for further action.