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Fifth UA: 14/24 Index: MDE 23/9397/2025 Saudi Arabia of May 15, 2025

## **SAUDI ARABIA**

### **UPCOMING HEARING FOR IMPRISONED SAUDI WOMEN'S RIGHTS ACTIVIST**

Manahel al-Otaibi, a fitness trainer and women's rights activist, has been in prison in Saudi Arabia since November 16, 2022. On January 9, 2024, she was secretly sentenced to 11 years in prison by the Specialized Criminal Court (SCC). The court convicted her of so-called "terrorist offenses."

Her next court hearing is scheduled for May 26, 2025.

Manahel's arrest and harsh sentence stem from peaceful online activism. She was first charged under Saudi Arabia's Anti-Cyber Crime Law. Later, authorities added charges under the counter-terrorism law. The reason? She spoke out for women's rights on social media. She also shared photos of herself at a mall without wearing an abaya—a traditional loose-fitting long-sleeved robe—on Snapchat.

While in detention, Manahel has been subjected to torture, other forms of abuse, and enforced disappearance.

#### **Write to Saudi Arabia's Minister for Justice urging him to:**

- Immediately and unconditionally release Manahel al-Otaibi, as she has been convicted solely for peacefully exercising her right to freedom of expression.
- Ensure she has immediate access to medical care while she remains in detention.
- Launch an independent and impartial investigation into her allegations of torture and other ill-treatment and hold those responsible to account.

#### **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](mailto: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](mailto:caemb@mofa.gov.sa)

## ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Manahel al-Otaibi, a fitness trainer and women's rights activist, was first brought before the Criminal Court in Riyadh. The charges against her were based on her peaceful social media activity, including her support for the #EndMaleGuardianship campaign. According to court documents reviewed by Amnesty International, prosecutors accused her of publishing content that called for women to reject religious principles and social values, and of violating public morals and public order.

These charges were filed under Saudi Arabia's Anti-Cybercrime Law. On January 23, 2023, the court declared it lacked jurisdiction and referred the case to the Specialized Criminal Court (SCC). The SCC routinely uses vague laws to punish peaceful dissent, often equating online activism with terrorism. Amnesty International has documented serious human rights violations at every stage of the SCC's legal process.

Since 2018, Saudi authorities have arrested and detained numerous women's rights activists, many of whom campaigned against the male guardianship system or for the right to drive. These women have reported enduring torture, sexual harassment, and other forms of abuse in detention. Those who have been released are often subject to travel bans and restrictions on speech.

Manahel has been forcibly disappeared on two separate occasions—first from November 5, 2023, to April 2024, and again from December 15, 2024, to March 15, 2025. On April 14, 2024, she was able to call her family and informed them she was being held in solitary confinement at al-Malaz Prison, suffering from a broken leg after a beating, and was denied medical care.

In September 2024, following another period of incommunicado detention, she contacted her family again. She said she had been kept in solitary confinement for a month, beaten by prison guards and inmates, and forced to clean toilets. She also reported that prison authorities threatened to return her to solitary if her family continued to speak out. Her sister Fawzia believes the call was staged to pressure the family into silence.

Manahel suffers from multiple sclerosis, a chronic neurological condition that her family believes developed after she witnessed the 2017 arrest of her older sister, Mariam al-Otaibi. Mariam is a well-known human rights defender who was detained for 104 days for advocating women's rights. She remains under a travel ban and is restricted from speaking out.

Manahel's sister Fawzia al-Otaibi has also faced state targeting. In the same case brought against Manahel, the prosecutor accused Fawzia of leading a social media campaign that urged Saudi girls to reject religious norms and cultural traditions. A court document reviewed by Amnesty International stated that a separate arrest order would be issued for her. Fearing arrest, Fawzia left Saudi Arabia in 2022 after being summoned for questioning.

Manahel's case is part of a larger crackdown on peaceful activism in Saudi Arabia. The SCC has targeted many others under similar charges. One high-profile example is Salma al-Shehab, a Leeds University PhD student and mother of two. In January 2023, the SCC sentenced her to 27 years in prison, followed by a 27-year travel ban, for tweets supporting women's rights. Her sentence was later reduced, and she was released in February 2025 after completing her revised term.

Amnesty International has documented the cases of at least 86 individuals prosecuted in Saudi Arabia since 2013 solely for exercising their rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly, or association. Among them:

- 40 were prosecuted specifically for expressing opinions on social media
- Many were human rights defenders, peaceful political activists, journalists, poets, and clerics
- The real number of such cases is likely much higher.

***Please take action as soon as possible until October 12, 2025. The UA will be duly updated should there be the need for further action.***