

June 25, 2014

The Honorable John F. Kerry
Secretary of State
United States Department of State
2201 C Street Northwest
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Secretary Kerry,

We write as an informal group of organizations and individuals who are scholars, religious leaders, human rights advocates, and practitioners to request that the U.S. Department of State take an active role in securing the immediate and unconditional release of two detained human rights activists in Saudi Arabia, Waleed Abu al-Khair and Raif Badawi.

As you are well aware, the rights to religion, belief, and expression are highly constrained in Saudi Arabia. Over several decades, the country has crushed dissent through blasphemy laws and legislation that bars criticism of religion and other traditional values, as well as government leaders. Most recently, the government has gone as far as defining terrorism to include “offending other countries and their leaders,” calling for “atheistic thinking,” and “questioning the constants of Islam upon which this country was founded” Waleed Abu al-Khair and Raif Bafawi are clear victims of this restrictive environment.

Badawi, 30, is one of the founders of the website Liberal Saudi Network, which promotes open discussion on social issues and religion. On June 17, 2012, he was arrested and charged with insulting Islam and apostasy, the latter of which carries the punishment of death. On January 22, 2013, a high-level Saudi court in Jeddah refused to charge Badawi with apostasy and referred his case to a lower court. On July 29, 2013, the lower court found Badawi guilty of insulting Islam and showing disobedience, and sentenced him to seven years in prison and 600 lashes. The Court of Appeal in Mecca struck down that ruling, and sent his case for review to the Criminal Court in Jeddah. On May 7, 2014, a Saudi court issued a new sentence: 10 years in prison, 1,000 lashes, and a one million-riyal fine. Badawi has now been in prison for more than two-and-a-half years.

Like Badawi, al-Khair, 35, has faced continued legal harassment over his human rights activism. Al-Khair is a human rights lawyer and founder of the Monitor of Human Rights in Saudi Arabia. He was first targeted in 2011 for speaking out on behalf of a group of 16 prisoners of conscience. On October 6, 2013, he was formally charged with, among other things, “breaking allegiance to and disobeying the ruler”, “disrespecting the authorities,” and “offending the judiciary.” Evidence against him is largely based on his signing of a petition that criticized the Saudi authorities for harshly dealing with prisoners of conscience.

After several hearings, on October 29, 2013, al-Khair was sentenced to three months imprisonment by the Criminal Court. On February 6, 2014 the Court of Appeal upheld

his sentence. He was arrested on April 15, 2014, and has been held in prison since, part of that time spent at al-Ha'ir prison in Riyadh, where he was deprived of contact with his family and subjected to torturous conditions. His next hearing will be held on June 26, 2014. Under the new terrorism decrees, al-Khair faces a minimum sentence of three years in prison, and as many as 20.

To make matters worse, al-Khair is Badawi's lawyer, which means Badawi no longer has formal legal representation. Furthermore, al-Khair's wife, Samar, was forced to give birth to a child on June 12, 2014 without her husband at her side. Meanwhile, Badawi's wife and children currently live in Sherbrooke, Quebec, in Canada, and await his freedom.

International human rights treaties such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights guarantee every individual the rights to freedom of belief, religion, and expression. It is unfortunately true that Saudi Arabia is not a signatory to these treaties. Yet, by virtue of its membership in the United Nations – and especially its membership on the UN Human Rights Council – Saudi Arabia has made a promise to the international community to uphold the founding UN Charter, which calls on member states to promote and encourage “respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion.”

The arrest of al-Khair and brutal sentencing of Badawi provide obvious evidence that Saudi Arabia refuses to live up its promises to the international community.

Yet Saudi Arabia is not simply a member of the international community – it is also a key ally and trading partner of the United States, which has enshrined in its Constitution the individual rights to freedom of religion, belief, and expression, and plays a leading role in promoting these universal rights throughout the world. It is at odds with American principles and diplomatic goals to continue to engage with Saudi Arabia while not making clear that the country is failing to respect the most basic of human rights.

In light of the above, we respectfully request that the State Department engage with Saudi Arabian government officials and make clear that it seeks the immediate release of al-Khair and Badawi, and an end to similar prosecutions.

Thank you for your attention to this letter. Please do not hesitate to contact us.

Sincerely,

ORGANIZATIONS

AMERICAN HUMANIST ASSOCIATION
CENTER FOR INQUIRY
INSTITUTE FOR GULF AFFAIRS
INSTITUTE ON RELIGION AND PUBLIC POLICY
MUSLIMS FOR PROGRESSIVE VALUES

RUSSIAN ORTHODOX AUTONOMOUS CHURCH OF AMERICA
UNION OF COUNCILS FOR JEWS IN THE FORMER SOVIET UNION

Individuals

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Scott Morgan
President
Red Eagle Enterprises
