

## On 2nd Anniversary of Arrests, 17 NGOs call for Release of Saudi Women’s Rights Advocates

May 15, 2020

(Washington, DC) — Today, the Project on Middle East Democracy and 16 other organizations issued the following statement on the two-year anniversary of the Saudi government’s detention of some of the country’s leading women’s rights advocates. Two years ago, the government of Saudi Arabia, under the day-to-day rule of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, [began](#) its first [wave of arrests](#) of several of Saudi Arabia’s most prominent women’s rights activists, journalists, and bloggers just before the kingdom was preparing to end its ban on women driving. By arresting the very women—including [Nouf Abdulaziz](#), [Loujain Al-Hathloul](#), [Eman Al-Nafjan](#), Hatoun al-Fassi, and Aziza al-Yousef—who had long peacefully advocated for the right to drive and other basic rights, as well as at least four men who supported their efforts, the Saudi government sent the chilling message that any expression of dissent or effort to improve the rights of Saudi citizens would be harshly punished.

The Saudi authorities then instigated a defamation campaign in the media, calling the peaceful activists “traitors.” Many of those arrested were then [subjected](#) to imprisonment, solitary confinement, sexual assault, and other forms of [torture](#)—including through the use of electric shocks, whipping, caning, and waterboarding.

Nearly a year later, in March 2019, the Saudi authorities opened trials against eleven of the detainees, partly based on [charges](#) related to sharing information about women’s rights with diplomats, journalists, and human rights organizations. The trials have been marked by a striking [lack of due process](#): The defendants were not informed of the charges against them prior to the trial; they were not allowed to speak during the hearings; and their lawyers and foreign journalists were barred from attendance. Despite numerous international calls—from the U.S. Congress, the [European Parliament](#), and the [United Nations Human Rights Council](#)—for the unconditional release of the detainees, Saudi authorities have [conducted](#) even more arrests. And now, as Amnesty International reports, there are 13 women’s rights activists entangled in [sham trials](#). At least five—Nouf Abdulaziz, Samar Badawi, Loujain al-Hathloul, Nasema al-Sada, and Maya’a al-Zahrani—are still in prison, and at least eight others are temporarily released but still face charges. (Aziza Al-Yousef’s son, Salah Al-Haidar,

is one of at least two American citizens wrongfully detained in Saudi Arabia, the other being journalist Bader al-Ibrahim.)

The prosecution of these peaceful activists is only one part of a broader campaign of repression under Mohammed bin Salman that includes the [arrests](#) of numerous other peaceful activists, journalists and intellectuals, the murder of self-exiled journalist Jamal Khashoggi, the [execution](#) of other Saudi citizens for participating in nonviolent protests, and a catastrophic intervention in the Yemen war. It is particularly galling that Saudi Arabia is campaigning to win a seat on the UN Human Rights Council in October and is preparing to host the G-20 Summit in November while ignoring the demands of Saudis and the international community to rectify these and other human rights violations. We, the undersigned, call on Saudi authorities to end their campaign to silence dissent and repress freedom of expression, release all prisoners of conscience, and immediately and unconditionally drop legal charges against them. We, furthermore, call on the U.S. government and other governments to press for the release of these women's rights activists, journalists, and all other prisoners of conscience, and to re-evaluate their relationships accordingly, including the question of participation in this year's Saudi-led G20 Summit.

Signed,

ALQST for Human Rights

Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain

Amnesty International USA

Article 19

Center for International Policy

CODEPINK

Committee to Protect Journalists

Demand Progress Education Fund

Freedom Forward

The Freedom Initiative

Gulf Centre for Human Rights

Human Rights First

James W. Foley Legacy Foundation

PEN America

Project on Middle East Democracy

Reporters Without Borders

Women's March Global