

# SAUDI ARABIA: COUNTERING TERRORISM WITH REPRESSION

**‘If there is anything against him prosecute him, if not, release him...’**

Extract from a letter to Amnesty International from a detainee's relative

**The Saudi Arabian authorities have mounted a sustained assault on human rights in the name of countering terrorism, exacerbating an already dire human rights situation in the country.**

The scale of abuses is shocking. Thousands of people have had their lives devastated by violations of their basic rights. Arrested arbitrarily, they have been swallowed up into a secretive and abusive criminal justice system. They have been kept in solitary confinement for long periods and denied any contact with the outside world for months or years. They have been held without any opportunity to challenge the legality of their detention. They have been tortured using electric shocks and other gruesome methods. They have been sentenced to death, flogging and long prison terms after trials that make a mockery of justice.

Some have been repeatedly arrested or are being held for “re-education”; others are still in prison long after their



sentence has expired. Some people have been shot dead by the security forces in questionable circumstances. Security suspects have been sent to countries where it was known their lives would be at risk.

Such egregious human rights abuses have been largely ignored by the world's governments, seemingly

**Special forces guard a checkpoint near to where an international counter-terrorism conference was held in February 2005.**

influenced by Saudi Arabia's crucial importance as a source of oil, international finance, arms contracts, intelligence and military bases, and as a leader in the Islamic world. The silence must end.



Khaled Hussein Albuluw, aged 38, was arrested in June 2003 at his office at the RMZ company in Dammam.

He is said to have been held incommunicado during the first three months of his detention before he was allowed visits by his parents. He was reportedly kept in solitary confinement for a year. He was also said to have been beaten.

In 2006 Amnesty International wrote to the state-appointed National Human Rights Commission seeking clarification of his legal status, the reasons for his arrest and his place of detention. The Commission undertook to seek such clarification, but no further information has been provided to Amnesty International.

Khaled Hussein Albuluw was one of thousands of people detained during waves of mass arrests following bomb attacks in May 2003. Like most other detainees, he has been held in various places without trial and with no access to lawyers and the courts to challenge the legality of his detention.

Since the 11 September 2001 attacks in the USA, carried out by a group that included Saudi Arabian nationals, and in the wake of bombings and other attacks inside Saudi Arabia, the Saudi Arabian authorities have imposed a range of counter-terrorism measures that have swept aside embryonic legal reforms and left people in Saudi Arabia almost completely devoid of fundamental freedoms and rights.

Old and new laws prescribe harsh and cruel punishments for terrorism-related offences, including beheading and flogging, yet they are so vaguely written that they can be, and are, used to punish and suppress activities that are recognized as legitimate the world over. The security forces fail to respect even these laws, routinely committing human rights violations, including torture, knowing that their actions will go unpunished.

The government has used secrecy, repression and its international clout to continue this assault on human rights without hindrance. Even the families of prisoners fear punishment if they speak about the treatment of their loved ones; many have implored Amnesty International not to highlight their cases, fearing retribution.

It is time the world's governments put their narrow political and economic self interests to one side and started to apply meaningful pressure on the

Saudi Arabian authorities to stop the endemic abuse of human rights.

## ARBITRARY ARREST AND DETENTION

*"He has NOT appeared before court and NO charges have been filed against him. Is he going to stay imprisoned indefinitely? If there is anything against him, prosecute him, if not, release him, that should be the logical thinking... How much longer can we wait for a reply from the Saudi government? Another year? A decade? There must be a next step and further actions to take; waiting for time to pass does not seem effective."*

Extract from a letter to Amnesty International from a detainee's relative, whose name has been withheld for fear of reprisal

Arbitrary arrest and prolonged detention of political and security suspects without trial and without access to lawyers are long-standing abuses in Saudi Arabia. Since 2001, however, the number of victims has risen from hundreds to thousands.

Among those caught in the sweeping repression are an unknown number of human rights defenders, peaceful advocates of political reform, members of religious minorities and many others who have committed no crime recognized as such by international law. Some of these are prisoners of conscience.

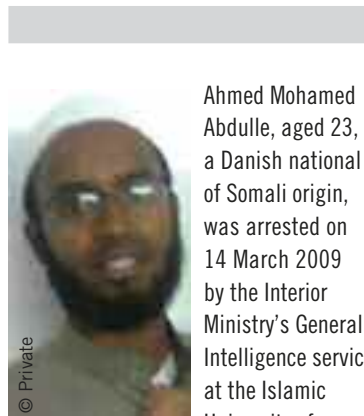
Most of those held, however, are suspected supporters of religious opposition groups officially dubbed as “misguided”, as well as people forcibly returned from Iraq, Pakistan, Yemen and elsewhere.

The detainees have no idea of what is going to happen to them. Most have been held for years without trial, often in solitary confinement for long periods. They are not allowed to see a lawyer. They are denied adequate medical care. They cannot challenge the legality of their detention before a court of law. And for the period following arrest and during interrogation, which can last for years, they are not even allowed to contact their families.

Hopes for a change to this pattern of abuse were raised in October

2001 with the introduction of the Law on Criminal Procedures and the Lawyers’ Code. These introduced two major safeguards: the limitation of detention without charge or trial to a maximum of six months; and the right of detainees to seek legal assistance. In practice, neither safeguard has been observed.

The strict secrecy surrounding detentions means that Amnesty International does not know the exact number of people held on suspicion of terrorism-related offences. In July 2007, the Interior Minister reported that 9,000 security suspects had been detained between 2003 and 2007 and that 3,106 of them remained held. Other sources estimate the numbers to be much higher.



Ahmed Mohamed Abdule, aged 23, a Danish national of Somali origin, was arrested on 14 March 2009 by the Interior Ministry’s General Intelligence service at the Islamic University of

Madina, where he was studying. He is being held without charge in the General Intelligence Prison in Madina. He has had no access to lawyers and it is feared that he is being held in solitary confinement.

## POLITICAL VIOLENCE

Saudi Arabia has experienced sporadic incidents of political violence over many years that were mounted, it appears, by groups and individuals opposed to the ruling Al-Saud family and to the government’s close links with the USA and other Western countries.

The incidence of attacks increased significantly after the US-led invasion of Iraq in March 2003. In May that year, a series of lethal bombings targeted housing complexes in Riyadh, killing 35 people and injuring many others, and the security forces were reported

to have engaged in shoot-outs or clashes with armed men suspected of involvement in the bombings.

A similar pattern of sporadic attacks and clashes between security forces and armed militants was also reported in 2004 and 2005.

All governments have a duty to protect the public from violent attacks, including by bringing to justice those who plan, commit and incite such attacks. In doing so, however, they must comply with their obligations under international human rights law. Combating terrorism may not

be used as a pretext for gross violations of human rights or for permitting security and other officials to commit such crimes with impunity.

Yet, the Saudi Arabian authorities have chosen repression as their main response to attacks.

Their disregard for human rights in the pursuit of security is not new. Draconian legislation and denial of human rights have long characterized Saudi Arabia, where state power rests almost entirely with the King and the ruling Al-Saud family.

Dr Saud al-Hashimi, a medical doctor, began a hunger strike on 1 June 2009. As a result, he was reported to have been tortured and otherwise ill-treated on 5 and 6 June. He was stripped of his clothes apart from his underwear, shackled, dragged from his cell and placed in an extremely cold cell for about five hours. He is now said to be in need of medical treatment.

He and seven other men – Sulieman al-Rushudi, a retired judge; Al-Sharif Saif Al-Ghalib; Dr Musa al-Qirni and Dr ‘Abdel Rahman al-Shumayri, both university professors; Fahd al-Qirshi; ‘Abdel Rahman Khan and ‘Abdelaziz al-Khariji – were arrested in Jeddah and Madina on 3 February 2007 and all but one remain held in Dhahban prison, near Jeddah, without charge or trial. All have been held in solitary confinement.

The men are prisoners of conscience. They had issued a petition calling for political reform and discussed the idea of establishing a human rights organization. The Interior Ministry said that the detainees had been arrested because they were collecting money to support terrorism, an accusation denied by the detainees.

## TORTURE AND OTHER ILL-TREATMENT

*“They shackled my feet on a 24-hour basis for three weeks and put me in a small cell with no air conditioning. Every time I complained they gave me electric shocks with what looked like a short stick of similar thickness to that of a mobile phone... which affected me psychologically and I continue to suffer as a result.”*

These are the words of a former security detainee who was held in various prisons in Saudi Arabia without charge or trial from 2002 to 2006, speaking to Amnesty International in February 2008.

Torture of detainees in Saudi Arabia remains rife and is committed with impunity by the various security forces.

Allegations of torture received by Amnesty International include severe beatings with sticks, punching, suspension from the ceiling, use of electric shocks and sleep deprivation. Flogging is imposed as a legal punishment and can involve sentences of thousands of lashes.

The safeguards introduced in the 2001 Law on Criminal Procedures, which prohibit torture and require interrogations not to affect the will of the accused in making a statement, appear not to have had any impact on the use of torture.

Moreover, the large number of people arbitrarily detained as terrorism suspects and held incommunicado has vastly increased the number of people at risk of torture.

The torturers operate in a climate that encourages their crimes. Courts readily accept “confessions” that defendants say were forced out of them using torture, and the authorities show no interest in investigating such allegations.

The absolute ban on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, which is spelled out in international law, has long been flouted by the Saudi Arabian authorities. However, the situation appears to have deteriorated because of the actions taken by the authorities in the name of countering terrorism.

## UNFAIR TRIALS

In October 2008 the government announced that a special criminal court was being established to try 991 detainees accused of capital offences, including murder and causing bomb explosions. It did not disclose the identities or any other details of the defendants, nor indicate whether they would have access to lawyers or whether their hearings would be public.

This was especially worrying because trials of political or security detainees



in Saudi Arabia are invariably summary and grossly unfair. Court hearings are often held in secret and defendants are rarely allowed to have a lawyer. In many cases, defendants and their families are not even informed of the progress of legal proceedings against them.

In early July 2009 the government announced that the trials of 330 people which began in March had concluded. It said that one defendant had been sentenced to death and 323 others had received prison terms ranging from a few months to 30 years. Some of the 323 received additional punishments of fines or forced residence; others will be

released only after repenting. Of the remaining six defendants, three were sentenced to travel bans and three were acquitted. No further information was given and hundreds still face summary, unfair trials and possible death sentences.

The relative of one detainee wrote to Amnesty International:

*"My relative... may be sent to one of those fake courts and be sentenced without a fair trial nor lawyer neither right of defence after serving almost seven years in jail. I and his child are not able to see him. This is inhumane treatment of prisoners and prisoner's family."*

**Special forces guard a hotel in Riyadh at which an international counter-terrorism conference was held in February 2005.**

**'[T]he fight against terrorism threats cannot justify undermining due process rights afforded to all accused...'**

**UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention**



Abdul Rahim al-Mirbati, a 48-year-old Bahraini businessman, was arrested in 2003 or 2004 in Madina. According to his family, he had travelled to Saudi Arabia with his 13-year-old son who needed medical treatment there following an operation in Bahrain.

The security forces took Abdul Rahim al-Mirbati to Madina Prison where he was held for three days. He was then transferred to al-Ruwais Prison in Jeddah where he was detained for three months. He was questioned and denied any visits. He is reported to have been tortured and otherwise ill-treated during this period.

From al-Ruwais Prison he was transferred to al-Hair Prison in Riyadh and allowed family visits once a month in the presence of an officer. In April 2008 he was transferred to Asir Prison and then to al-Dammam Central Prison where he is currently held.

Although he is said to have been accused of planning to carry out bombings in Bahrain, his relatives are not aware of any charges brought against him. They have contacted various authorities in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain to seek clarification of his legal status but to no avail.

Before the recent trials, only a small minority of people held on security grounds were charged and tried. Their trials are reported to have comprised only brief sessions before a panel of three inquisitors who simply questioned those accused about confessions or other statements they had made, or were alleged to have made, under interrogation while held incommunicado.

## DEATH PENALTY

In November 2004 the Interior Ministry announced that four men arrested in 2003 and accused of political killings in al-Jouf, northern Saudi Arabia, were to be referred for trial. Nothing more was known until 1 April 2005, when the bodies of three of the four men, which had been crucified after execution, were put on public display. Very little is known about their trial. The fourth defendant was sentenced to a term of imprisonment.

The government has not announced any other executions directly linked to people arrested on suspicion of terrorism-related offences. However, Amnesty International is concerned that many of those currently being tried may be sentenced to death and executed.

Amnesty International believes that the death penalty violates the right to life. This view is finding increasing



acceptance around the world. Indeed, in 2007 and 2008 the UN General Assembly called for a moratorium on the death penalty.

Even among those who maintain that the death penalty is legal under



**‘[T]he promotion and protection of human rights for all and the rule of law is essential to all components of the [UN Global Counter-Terrorism] Strategy, recognizing that effective counter-terrorism measures and the protection of human rights are not conflicting goals, but complementary and mutually reinforcing...’**

**UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, adopted in 2006**

international law, there is recognition that an execution following a trial that in any way falls short of international fair trial standards constitutes a violation of the right to life. This means all executions in Saudi Arabia violate the right to life.

**Photo provided by a contact who confirmed that it shows the bodies of three men who were executed and crucified in al-Jouf on 1 April 2005.**

## RENDITIONS AND FORCIBLE RETURNS

Saudi Arabia's practice of returning people to countries where their lives or security will be at risk has been exacerbated by its counter-terrorism measures and by bilateral and multilateral co-operation agreements with various countries, particularly those in the Middle East.

Saudi Arabia has not signed the 1951 UN Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and has no domestic laws that clearly prohibit the sending of people to countries where they might face serious human rights violations. However, Saudi Arabia is a state party to the UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, which prohibits the sending of people to countries where they would be at risk of torture.

Scores of security suspects and political opponents have been transferred between Saudi Arabia and Yemen, for example, even though torture is rife in both countries. Methods of torture regularly documented by Amnesty International in Yemen include beating with sticks, punching, kicking, prolonged suspension by the wrists or ankles, burning with cigarettes, being stripped naked, deprivation of food, denial of timely access to medical help, and threats of sexual abuse.

## ACT NOW

**Call on the Saudi Arabian authorities to:**

- immediately and unconditionally release all prisoners of conscience;
- end all arbitrary arrests and detentions;
- provide fair, prompt and public trials to all detainees charged or held, including on suspicion of terrorism-related offences;
- investigate thoroughly and impartially all allegations of torture and other ill-treatment and bring those found responsible to justice;
- ensure that the death penalty and cruel, inhuman and degrading punishments, such as flogging, are neither sought nor carried out in the pending terrorism-related mass trials;
- bring Saudi Arabia's terrorism-related laws and practices into line with international human rights standards;
- investigate thoroughly and impartially all killings by government forces and armed groups and bring the perpetrators to justice without the use of the death penalty.

### WRITE TO

His Majesty King 'Abdullah Bin 'Abdul 'Aziz Al-Saud  
The Custodian of the two Holy Mosques  
Office of His Majesty the King  
Royal Court  
Riyadh  
Kingdom of Saudi Arabia  
Fax: (via Ministry of the Interior)  
+966 1 403 1185  
Salutation: Your Majesty

His Royal Highness Prince Naif bin 'Abdul 'Aziz Al-Saud  
Second Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of the Interior  
Ministry of the Interior  
PO Box 2933  
Airport Road  
Riyadh 11134  
Kingdom of Saudi Arabia  
Fax: +966 1 403 1185  
Salutation: Your Royal Highness

Please send copies of your appeals to Saudi Arabia representatives accredited to your country and to your member of parliament and your Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

**AMNESTY  
INTERNATIONAL**



**Amnesty International** is a global movement of 2.2 million people in more than 150 countries and territories who campaign to end grave abuses of human rights.

Our vision is for every person to enjoy all the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights standards.

We are independent of any government, political ideology, economic interest or religion – funded mainly by our membership and public donations.

August 2009  
Index: MDE 23/025/2009

Amnesty International  
International Secretariat  
Peter Benenson House  
1 Easton Street  
London WC1X 0DW  
United Kingdom  
[www.amnesty.org](http://www.amnesty.org)