

# **SAUDI ARABIA'S POLITICAL PRISONERS:**

**Towards a  
Third Decade  
of Silence**

**1990  
2000  
2010**

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Saudi Arabia is a country in which the al-Saud family represents the absolute political, cultural and religious authority. This absolutist nature of the Saudi state ensures that free speech is stifled and that all forms of political opposition and dissent are harshly suppressed and silenced. Among the primary tools of this suppression, the government employs the tactic of arbitrary detention without charge or trial, in addition to staging sham trials lacking any semblance of due process, both of which have become hallmarks of Saudi “justice.”

Political imprisonment in Saudi Arabia is an epidemic has not spared any sector of Saudi society, including reformists, human rights activists, lawyers, political parties, religious scholars, bloggers, individual protestors, as well as long-standing government supporters who merely voiced mild and partial criticism of government policy. The known political prisons in Saudi Arabia have a capacity to hold 10,000, yet insider reports confirm these prisons to be oversubscribed three times over, with some prisoners even known to be held at irregular detention facilities, putting the actual number of political prisoners at over 30,000. This is exceptionally high considering the country's total population stands at around 27 million, of whom only around 18 million are Saudi nationals.

The purpose of this briefing is to draw attention to some key case studies of political imprisonment in Saudi Arabia, highlighting the diverse nature of the victims of imprisonment, with a focus on ongoing cases of suppression.

# The 1990s

Following the first Gulf War (1990–1991) and the Saudi government's handling of the conflict, broad sections of Saudi society came together to call upon the government for serious political and social reforms, particularly in the area of human rights, the justice system and political participation and representation. University academics, lawyers, businessmen and religious scholars signed their names to an open letter directed to the government, which became known as the '**Letter of Demands**'. The letter was also endorsed by some prominent names among the official governmental religious establishment, the Council of Senior Scholars, including the establishment's two highest ranking scholars, **Shaykh Abdul Aziz ibn Baz** and **Shaykh Muhammad ibn Uthaymeen**. Soon after that, an expanded and detailed version of the letter was written, signed to and circulated under the name of the '**Memorandum of Advice**' and the country's first human rights organisation, the **Committee for the Defence of Legitimate Rights (CDLR)**, was set up in 1993. The CDLR's official spokesperson was **Prof Muhammad al-Massari**, an academic who would later relocate the Committee's main office to London, and its founding members included his father **Shaykh Abdullah Suleiman al-Massari**, the head of the government ombudsman office during the reign of kings Saud, Faisal and Khaled; **Shaykh Abdullah ibn Jibreel**, another member of the government's Council of Senior Scholars; **Dr Suleiman al-Rushoodi**, a prominent lawyer who would later become a permanent fixture on the reform circuit; and **Dr Abdullah al-Hamed**, an academic who would also continue to champion reform for the coming two decades.

It was at this stage that the government sought to drive a wedge between the reformists and the support they found among some scholars in the official religious establishment. The government conducted a comprehensive campaign of mass arrests against the reformists, detaining, among others, the CDLR's spokesperson **Prof Muhammad al-Massari**; **Dr Sa'ad al-Faqih**, a surgeon and member of the CDLR who would later help Prof al-Massari relocate its office to London; and **Dr Ahmed al-Tuwaijry**, the Dean of the Education Faculty at King Saud University. More arrests soon followed, with the detention of three names that would continue to haunt the Saudi government, **Dr Abdullah al-Hamed**, **Shaykh Abdul Aziz Muhammad al-Wuhaybi** and **Dr Suleiman al-Rushoodi**.

The government's measures achieved relative success, with the effective castigation of **Shaykh Abdullah ibn Jibreel** and the commissioning of a Fatwa from the government's Council of Senior Scholars condemning the CDLR and rejecting the project that the Council's most senior members had previously endorsed in the form of the '**Letter of Demands**'. The government's oppressive crackdown against reform, as well as its endemic corruption and its serial political indiscretions, pushed a new generation of religious scholars from outside the official establishment to call for mass demonstrations; an unprecedented event in the country. The symbolic figureheads of this movement were **Shaykh Salman al-Odah** and **Shaykh Safar al-Hawali** and included others such as **Shaykh Naser al-Omar**, who would later reconcile most of his differences with the government, and **Dr Sa'eed Aal-Zu'air**, a religious scholar and professor of media studies who was imprisoned upon attempting to dissuade the religious establishment's top scholar, **Shaykh Abdul Aziz ibn Baz**, from issuing an edict that would have paved the way for recognising and normalising relations with the state of Israel.

Most of the reformist activists and academicians were eventually released from prison in the 1990s, with varying degrees of travel and employment restrictions applied to them upon release. The **CDLR** decided to establish an office in London to oppose the government from abroad, under the supervision of **Prof Muhammad al-Massari** and **Dr Sa'ad al-Faqih**. However, the religious scholars who were imprisoned for challenging the government and its policies remained imprisoned until 1999 and remained under house arrest for another few years after being released.

# The 2000s

The first decade of the new century posed many challenges to the Saudi regime. The US-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, beginning in 2001 and 2003 respectively, were widely perceived by Saudi society to have taken place with the acquiescence of the Saudi government. This renewed popular grievances that arose from the Saudi government's assistance to the US during the Gulf War a decade earlier. Whereas some among the previous generation of the regime's critics, such as **Shaykh Salman al-Odah** and **Shaykh Safar al-Hawali**, spoke critically against the concept of US-led wars against the two countries, they avoided confrontation with the Saudi government by remaining largely silent on the issue of Saudi government involvement and approval of the two wars. On the other hand, a new generation of critics arose as a result of the tense political climate.

Beginning shortly after the Iraq invasion in March 2003, the period 2003–2006 saw a spate of attacks in Saudi Arabia attributed to Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), apparently targeting both the Western presence in the country as well as the Saudi government itself. These attacks were exploited by the Saudi regime to enact a repressive 'counter-terrorism' policy, which would effectively silence any criticism of the government. **Dr Sa'eed Aal-Zu'air**, first imprisoned in 1995, was released from prison in 2003. He was re-imprisoned a few months later in 2004 after participating in a brief telephone interview with Al Jazeera news channel, in which he criticised the government's handling of the attacks. Around the same time, another popular religious scholar, **Shaykh Suleiman Nasser al-Alwan**, who had been banned from teaching for a number of years but was permitted to teach once again in May 2003, was arrested by the Saudi security services on 28 April 2004 and was taken to Al-Hayer prison in Riyadh, where he still remains. **Shaykh al-Alwan** was not presented with an arrest warrant, however it is understood that he was imprisoned on the basis of public comments he made that were highly critical of US policy in the Arab world, and in particular for his denunciation of the US-led invasion of Iraq. **Shaykh al-Alwan** continues to suffer from ill treatment, including being held in complete isolation, enduring torture and being denied due process. Additionally, in 2007 he was pressed by the government to appear on national television in a public recorded statement to repudiate his previous positions. His refusal to do so has led to a renewed campaign of cruelty against him on the part of the Saudi authorities. [1]

As the Saudi government could not tolerate relatively mild critics, such as **Dr Sa'eed Aal-Zu'air** and **Shaykh Suleiman al-Alwan**, it certainly did not tolerate critics who were more vocal in their condemnation of the Saudi government, particularly in its negative involvement in the Iraq war. Two alleged AQAP theorists, known for their lengthy treatises critical of US and Saudi policy in the region and for challenging the government religious establishment to debate with them, **Shaykh Faris Aal-Shuwayl al-Zahrani** and **Shaykh Abdul Aziz al-Anzi**, were captured by Saudi security forces in August 2004 and May 2005 respectively after months in hiding. Neither individual has been charged with a crime, nor put on trial since their capture. They remain in Saudi custody today, but their exact whereabouts and the conditions of their imprisonment remain unknown. [2, 3] Additionally, three radical religious scholars of significant prominence, **Shaykh Ali al-Khudhair**, **Shaykh Ahmed al-Khalidi** and **Shaykh Nasser al-Fahad**, were imprisoned in May 2003 after issuing a joint statement rejecting the premise of a 'most wanted' list of 19 names that had recently been released by the Saudi government. The statement had included a Fatwa prohibiting anyone from assisting the Saudi government in their search for the 19 listed individuals, whether by republishing the 'wanted' posters, reporting the whereabouts of the individuals, or attempting to search for them. The scholars identified the reasoning behind this ruling as the fact that the list had been released under the aegis of the American 'war on terror' and thus, assisting the Saudi government in its pursuit of the individuals was in effect providing such assistance to the United States. [4] Six months into their imprisonment, in November 2003, **Shaykhs al-Khudhair**, **al-Khalidi** and **al-Fahad** were forced to appear on national television and made to publicly

renounce their previous views. Despite this apparent renunciation, the scholars were returned to prison, where they still remain today. [5] To this date, numerous letters written by **al-Khalidi** and **al-Fahad** have been smuggled out of prison, in which they retracted their televised pronouncements and expressed that they had been made under duress.

It was during this period of social upheaval that three reformists: the poet **Mr Ali al-Demaini**; university professor and human rights activist **Dr Matrouk al-Faleh** and veteran reformist and co-founder of the CDLR **Dr Abdullah al-Hamed**, began campaigning more openly for government reform, calling for the establishment of a constitutional monarchy as a first step towards solving the country's problems. The three activists were imprisoned in March 2004 after signing a petition demanding constitutional reform. It was not until 2005, when the Saudi throne passed from the late **Fahad ibn Abdul Aziz** to his half-brother **Abdullah**, that the three academics, as well as **Dr Sa'eed Aal-Zu'air** were released from prison thanks to a royal pardon issued by the new king on their behalf.

The last few years of the decade saw the arbitrary detention of a number of other well-known reformists, religious scholars and other activists, including the serial re-imprisonment of the most prominent among them. **Shaykh Khalid al-Rashed**, a highly popular religious scholar and speaker, was arrested on 19 March 2006 in Mecca, where he was completing the Umrah pilgrimage with his wife. This took place after he recorded an emotional, widely-distributed lecture [6] in which he condemned the Danish cartoons and called for the Prophet's honour to be defended, placing the incident in a wider context of humiliation, including the occupation of Palestine. **Dr Bisher Fahad al-Bisher**, a Riyadh-based university professor of Islamic law who was imprisoned in the 1990s without charge, was re-arrested on 15 March 2007. He remains in prison today, where he has been subjected to prolonged spells in solitary confinement and other forms of ill treatment. His family was only allowed to visit him for the first time 9 months after he was imprisoned and he has been held in a refrigerated underground cell and denied medical treatment, which has caused his health to deteriorate significantly. [7]

On Friday 2 February 2007, the Saudi government carried out mass arrests, which were touted in the media as part of a "successful counter-terrorism operation." The victims of these raids were in fact influential academics, rights activists and reformists, the most prominent of whom were **Dr Sa'ud Mukhtar al-Hashimi**, **Dr Musa al-Qarni** and **Dr Suleiman al-Rushoodi**. **Dr Sa'ud al-Hashimi** is a Jeddah-based medical doctor and a faculty member at King Abdulaziz University. He comes from a prominent family in the Hejaz and is a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad via the lineage of Imam Musa al-Kazim. He is a long standing human rights defender who has worked to protect civil and political rights in Saudi Arabia and has called for constitutional reform and democratic rights. One of his recordings [8] particularly attracted the ire of the ruling establishment, in which he called for academics and religious scholars to establish independent and transparent offices and research centres, which would in turn form councils that would aid the development of thought and cooperate in mobilising public action, contributing to a more open, accountable and socially responsible societal landscape. The Saudi Ministry of Interior has used this recording as evidence to accuse **Dr al-Hashimi** of 'sedition' and for "calling for the overthrow of the established system of governance." **Dr Musa al-Qarni** is a university professor of Islamic law and a historian of the Soviet war in Afghanistan. He had appeared in a television interview in 2006 highlighting the contradiction in the Saudi government's support for Osama bin Laden and the Jihadi movement in the 1980s and its opposition to the same movement today. Both **Dr al-Hashimi** and **Dr al-Qarni** remain in prison to this date. **Dr Suleiman al-Rushoodi** had been a co-signatory to the establishment of the CDLR, as well as being the human rights lawyer who defended the cases of the three reformists, **Dr Abdullah al-Hamed**, **Ali al-Demaini** and **Dr Matrouk al-Faleh** in 2005. **Dr al-Rushoodi** was only released from prison on Thursday 23 June 2011 due to the worsening condition of his health. All those arrested in February 2007, including **Dr al-Qarni**, **Dr al-Hashimi** and **Dr al-Rushoodi**, continue to remain on trial for blanket charges of "supporting and financing terrorism," "illegally collecting funds to support suspicious groups" and "engaging in embezzlement." [9]

One of the most tragic stories of the Saudi political prisoners is that of the professor of media studies **Dr Sa'eed Aal-Zu'air** and his family. Having been imprisoned twice before, from 1995 to 2003 and again from 2004 to 2005, **Dr Sa'eed Aal-Zu'air** was arrested again on Wednesday 6 June 2007. This time around, he was arrested along with one of his younger sons, **Mr Sa'ad Aal-Zu'air**, a reformist lawyer who had also spent time in prison in the past thanks to his activism. Both father and son remain imprisoned to this date. [10]

## The 2010s

After twenty years of government repression and the routine imprisonment and harassment of reformers and activists, the Saudi government has done very little to address the legitimate aspirations of its people, and even less to address the effectiveness of its policy in dealing with political opposition by refusing to revise it to a strategy based on principles of justice and equality. On the other hand, however, the Saudi people have become more politically aware and are now bolder in asserting their political identity and in standing up for their rights. Whereas in 1993, there mere establishment of a civil rights organisation, **the CDLR**, was deemed enough for the government to wage a wide-scaled campaign of arrests and harassment, by 2010, many independent political, activist and advocacy groups had been established, even if not acknowledged by the government. Examples of these groupings include progressive online magazines, such as Ro'yaah Magazine [<http://www.royaah.net/>] and the Omma Conference Magazine [<http://www.ommahconf.com/>], supervised by **Dr Abdul Aziz Muhammad al-Wuhaybi** and associated with the Omma Conference, a collective of regional branches of the Omma Party, first established in 2005 in Kuwait by **Dr Hakem al-Mutairi**. Other significant groups established in recent times have included rights organisations, such as the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association (ACPRA) [<http://www.acpra.net/>], which operates in both Arabic and English and has been pivotal in bringing to light the cases of Saudi Arabia's political prisoners and highlighting the need for political reform. The Association was co-founded in October 2009 by a number of prominent activists, including, but not limited to, **Mr Sa'ud Ahmed al-Dughathir**, a long-standing campaigner for civil rights; **Dr Abdul Kareem Yusuf al-Khidhr**, professor of comparative law; **Dr Abdullah al-Hamed**, one time co-founder of the CDLR; **Dr Mohammed Fahad al-Qahtani**, professor of political economics and current president of ACPRA; and **Mr Mohammed Salih al-Bejadi**, who would soon become a symbol for the rights movement. Additionally, veteran activists **Dr Musa al-Qarni** and **Dr Suleiman al-Rushoodi**, both imprisoned since February 2007 at the time of ACPRA's founding, announced their support for the project. [11] It was this increasingly organised collective of groups and activists that would spearhead the push for radical change in the country once the Arab Spring would take hold in early 2011.

Among the most prominent names to be imprisoned in 2010 were **Mukhlif al-Shammari**, **Dr Muhammad al-Abdul Karim** and **Thamir Abdul Karim al-Khidhr**. **Mukhlif al-Shammari**, a respected tribal leader and pro-reform writer, popular for his opinion pieces in his local Ha'il newspaper [12] and other various online magazines, was briefly arrested on 15 May 2010 and then imprisoned again the following month on 15 June 2010 while attending a dinner with friends. On 20 June 2010 he was charged with the offence of "annoying others" with his writings and was subsequently interrogated in relation to six of his published articles. He remains in prison to this date. [13, 14] **Dr Muhammad al-Abdul Karim** is an assistant professor of jurisprudence and Islamic legal theory. [15] It was his article entitled "The crisis of conflict amongst the governing wings in Saudi Arabia," published on the Omma Conference website on 22 November 2010 [16], which led to his arrest and imprisonment on Sunday 6 December 2010. [17] Following a highly publicised and sustained campaign, **Dr al-Abdul Karim** was released from prison on Tuesday 15 February 2011. **Thamir Abdul Karim al-Khidhr**, a university student who was 18 years old at the time of his imprisonment on 3 March 2010, was arrested partly

thanks to his own involvement with a student human rights group, but primarily as a means to put pressure on his father, **Dr Abdul Kareem Yusuf al-Khidhr**. As is the case of many other activists, **Thamir al-Khidhr** remains imprisoned to this date. [18]

After the Tunisian protest movement had succeeded in toppling **Zine El Abidine Ben Ali** and a day before **Hosni Mubarak** was forced to resign from his office in Egypt, a group of activists capitalised on the opportunity to announce the establishment of Saudi Arabia's first political party, the **Islamic Omma Party**, on 10 February 2011. The party's co-founders included **Dr Abdul Aziz Muhammad al-Wuhaybi**, a prominent lawyer and supervisor of the Omma Conference Magazine; **Dr Abdul Kareem Yusuf al-Khidhr** and **Mr Sa'ud bin Ahmed al-Dughaitir**, co-founders of ACPRA; **Dr Ahmed Sa'ad Gharm Aal-Ghamidi**, professor at Umm al-Qura University in Mecca; **Shaykh Muhammad Hussein al-Ghaanim al-Qahtani**, a respected businessman; **Mr Muhammad Naser al-Ghamidi**, a political activist; and **Dr Waleed Muhammad Abdullah al-Majid**, a lawyer and doctor of law. [19] The party's inaugural statement included a list of 188 prominent political prisoners and called for their immediate release as a first step towards meaningful reform in the country. [20] The party's co-founders were arrested and detained without charge on Thursday 16 February 2011, as was highlighted by IHRC at the time. [21] All the party's co-founders were eventually released, after being pressured to sign assurances that they would refrain from "anti-government activity," with the exception of **Dr Abdul Aziz Muhammad al-Wuhaybi** who remains imprisoned to this date. The remaining co-founders who have been released are forced to put up with severe travel restrictions and bans on the permission to teach. **Dr Abdul Kareem Yusuf al-Khidhr**, a party co-founder who has been one of the most active in writing and campaigning since being released, continues to suffer the additional pressure of having two of his sons held in prison as a form of political blackmail: His older son, **Thamir Abdul Karim al-Khidhr**, 20 years old, was imprisoned on 3 March 2010, a few months after his father had helped set up ACPRA, and his younger son **Jihad Abdul Karim al-Khidhr**, 17 years old, a secondary school student, was imprisoned on Sunday 20 March 2011, while demonstrating in front of the Interior Ministry building for the release of political prisoners, including his father at the time. Both **Thamir and Jihad al-Khidhr** remain in prison to this date. [22]

The period leading up to and including March 2011 proved to be particularly ripe with arrests all across the country, in part due to the call for mass protests in the style of those taking place in other Arab countries at the time, especially the protest called for on Friday 11 March 2011. These arrests targeted both known activists, such as **Shaykh Tawfiq al-Amir**, **Dr Mubarak Aal-Zu'air** and **Muhammad al-Bejadi**, as well as previously unknown individuals who have become overnight icons of the protest movement in Saudi Arabia. **Shaykh Tawfiq al-Amir**, a Shi'a scholar based in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province who had previously been arrested in April 2005 and September 2008 under direct orders from the Interior Minister, was imprisoned again on Sunday 27 February 2011 after delivering a sermon the previous Friday 25 February 2011, [23] in which he called for radical reform in the country and the establishment of a constitutional monarchy. He expressed the need to guarantee a separation of political powers and the establishment of a fully elected parliamentary consultative council and he condemned Saudi and Western interference in Bahrain. [24] He was released a week later on Sunday 6 March 2011 without having been charged with a crime. [25] **Shaykh al-Amir** was rearrested on Wednesday 3 August 2011 as he returned home from performing evening prayers and detained without charge. He remains imprisoned to this date. [26] **Dr Mubarak Aal-Zu'air** is a professor of media studies, having followed in the professional footsteps of his father **Dr Sa'eed Aal-Zu'air**. He was campaigning for the release of political prisoners, including his father, **Dr Sa'eed Aal-Zu'air**, and brother, **Mr Sa'ad Aal-Zu'air**, and was invited to a meeting at the Interior Ministry by means of a personal phone call from the Deputy Minister of Interior, **Prince Muhammad bin Nayef**. Despite this phone call and the assurances made by the prince that the situation of the prisoners would be resolved, **Dr Mubarak Aal-Zu'air** was arrested on the morning of Sunday 20 March 2011, as he was on his way to the Interior Ministry for a scheduled meeting with the prince. Since being imprisoned, he has managed to smuggle a letter out of his jail cell,

which has pointed to utterly contemptible prison conditions, including being forced to sleep inside a lavatory. IHRC has campaigned for the release of **Dr Mubarak Aal-Zu'air** and continue to call on the Saudi government to release him and the other members of his family unjustly imprisoned to this date. [27, 28, 29] **Muhammad Salih al-Bejadi**, a co-founder and core member of ACPRA, was also imprisoned the following day on Monday 21 March 2011 for his involvement in actively campaigning for the release of political prisoners. ACPRA has campaigned tirelessly on behalf of Mr al-Bejadi, yet he still remains imprisoned thanks to his work.

Amongst the prisoners arrested during this period who had had no known history of political activism, yet who have become prominent in the Saudi protest movement through their inspiring bravery and dedication, are **Muhammad al-Wad'ani** and **Khaled al-Juhani**. All that is known about **Muhammad al-Wad'ani** is that, as implied by his family name, he comes from a branch of the large and influential Dosary clan of central Arabia and that he is a school teacher by profession. **Al-Wad'ani** performed an unprecedented act in Saudi Arabia by appearing in a five-minute recorded video message of an explicitly political and categorically anti-establishment nature, which he had posted on YouTube in late February 2011. [30] The act had been unprecedented both for the fact that he appeared in the video not making any attempt to hide his identity, on the contrary, making a point to publish the video under his full, real name, and for the video's open rejection of royalty, as can be read from the video's title: "Now is the time to bring down the monarchy." **Al-Wad'ani** followed this video up with another scarcely over two minutes long, in which he confirmed the date and the meeting point for a demonstration he had called for in his first video as Friday 4 March 2011, and he acknowledged his expectation to stand alone on the day and be arrested for it. [31] He pointed out that the lesson that should be learned, were this to happen, is that so weak is the Saudi government that it finds it necessary to send out its forces to arrest a one-man demonstration on the basis of an internet video in which he practically surrenders himself. As he had predicted, **Muhammad al-Wad'ani** was arrested after Friday prayers on 4 March 2011 as he stood to lead the demonstration in the presence of a number of supporters. The moment of the arrest was recorded and uploaded to YouTube, [32] in which **al-Wad'ani** is being led away by plain clothes officers and the viciously sectarian nature of the regime and its supporters is demonstrated by someone being heard shouting "grab the Rafidhi (a derogatory term used against Shi'a), don't let him get away!", despite **al-Wad'ani** being from one of Arabia's largest Sunni clans. After his disappearance in early March, no one has heard from **al-Wad'ani**, yet some reports have pointed to him having to be hospitalised after a particularly brutal torture session.

**Khaled al-Juhani** is another school teacher and a father of four children, one of whom is autistic. **Al-Juhani** rose overnight from obscurity to being an icon of the Saudi protest movement, symbolising the plight of the average citizen, when he responded to the nationwide call for demonstrations on 11 March 2011. He resolved to make his voice heard by speaking openly about the need for radical reform in the country to Western journalists who had come to cover the protests. The BBC Arabic [33] and English [34] services conducted impromptu interviews with him, in which he called for freedom of expression and the press, demanded basic civil rights, condemned the overwhelming police presence and expressed his full knowledge that he would be arrested and imprisoned immediately after the interview was over, which is precisely what took place. Since his disappearance, **Khaled al-Juhani** has become the subject of an online campaign on both Facebook [35] and Twitter [36] under the title "Where is Khaled?"

Whilst the government's move to suppress individual demonstrators such as **al-Wad'ani** and **al-Juhani** may point to an unprecedented level of desperation, the Saudi government has recently gone a step further and has imprisoned some figures closely associated with government institutions, some of whom have been vocal government supporters who have defended the government against opponents in the past. The first of these examples is the controversial preacher, **Shaykh Suleiman al-Duwaish**, who has appeared numerous times on satellite television channels, such as **al-Alam**, towing the government line and standing up for its institutions in debates with dissidents such as **Prof Muhammad al-Massari**, [37]

and defending the government's decision to sack a prominent scholar, **Shaykh Sa'ad al-Shithry**, from the official religious establishment on the background of criticism he had levelled at the government. [38] **Shaykh al-Duwaish** had overstepped a red line when, in his campaign against hardcore secularists and liberals, he posted a video on YouTube in March 2011 and then followed it up on 15 May 2011 with an article, both of which levelled criticism directly against **Khaled al-Tuwaijry**, Chief of the Royal Court and the highest ranking government minister outside the Royal Family. **Shaykh al-Duwaish** attempted to pin all un-Islamic government and media practices and institutionalised corruption in the country, which he identified as the driving forces behind the increased sense of unrest and civil strife in wider Saudi society, on **al-Tuwaijry** and others, while exonerating the Royal Family from any blame. **Shaykh al-Duwaish** was arrested in June 2011 without charge or trial and continues to remain in prison today.

Another example is **Dr Yusuf al-Ahmed**, no stranger to controversy, as exemplified by his Fatwa calling for the prohibition of women to work as airline pilots and his invitation to demolish the Grand Mosque in Mecca so that it may be rebuilt in a way that would prevent all mixing of sexes. **Dr al-Ahmed** is an academic specialised in Islamic law who holds the position of President of the Islamic Law Editing Team for the Ministry of Education, having participated in the preparation of 28 publications, and a legal professional who has acted on behalf of people arbitrarily detained by the authorities. **Dr al-Ahmed** has not shied in the past from directing criticism towards the government, as in his open letters regarding the Ministry of Culture and Information, the Ministry of Health and the Justice Minister [39, 40, 41]; his criticism of the conduct of members of the Royal Family and other government officials [42, 43, 44]; and his criticism of government projects and policies, [45, 46] including his call on the government to expel deposed Tunisian dictator **Zine El Abidine Ben Ali** from Saudi Arabia. [47] However, the reason behind his arrest on 8 July 2011 was a series of three video messages he had posted on YouTube addressed directly to **King Abdullah ibn Abdul Aziz** and the Interior Minister **Prince Nayef ibn Abdul Aziz** regarding the issue of political prisoners in Saudi jails, calling for the need for those arbitrarily detained to receive a fair and just trial. The first video message, posted in March 2011, was over 17 minutes in duration [48]; the second, posted in May 2011, went into more detail and was over half an hour long. [49] The third message, [50] posted on 7 July 2011, just a day before **Dr al-Ahmed's** arrest, represented the final straw, as he used stern language to unequivocally condemn the government's recent mass arrest of female protestors who had been demonstrating to demand the release of their arbitrarily detained sons, brothers, husbands and other family members. **Dr al-Ahmed's** close association with governmental academic bodies and the Ministry of Education did not vouch for him and he remains imprisoned to this day.

## Conclusion:

The crisis of political imprisonment in Saudi Arabia is more serious today than it has ever been before. The plight of political prisoners, whether being made to endure arbitrary detention or to suffer in the complete absence of due process, continues into its third decade unimpeded. The Saudi government has done little, if anything at all, to attempt to change its tactics in dealing with political opponents, the default reaction being to lock them up and, if they are ever released, to continue applying pressures to them in the form of travel bans, employment bans, teaching bans, and by means of imprisoning direct family members and other relatives. Criticism of the Monarchy and its institutions, whether in the form of the Royal Court or the Royal Family itself, remains a red line that no one may dare cross without expecting the inevitable imprisonment and, if they are fortunate enough, a show of a trial that may attempt to show a form of process. Individual citizens are just as likely to be victims of this mockery of justice as prominent intellectuals and academics, and even staunch government supporters who inadvertently overstep the ever-changing invisible red lines may fall victim to this ruthless policy. The deafening silence that has taken hold with regard to this problem has resulted in a Saudi prison system whose population of political prisoners in 2011 has been estimated at 30,000, three times the official potential capacity of 10,000. Of these, spokesperson for the Interior Ministry **Major General Mansour al-Turki** admitted to holding 5,000 political prisoners in prisons across the country. Lawyers and human rights activists in Saudi Arabia have compiled lists of names that can account for around 7,000 political prisoners. The silence that has allowed for this appalling crime to take place unhindered must be broken. The Saudi government must come to realise that in a world where tyrants are being toppled, one after the other, suppressive policies such as these will only work against it. The Saudi government must release all political prisoners held in its jails across the country without delay, or it must conduct fair and open trials in which the accused may defend themselves.

## Endnotes:

- <sup>1</sup> [http://en.alkarama.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=192:saudi-arabia-mr-suleyman-al-alouane-arbitrarily-detained-for-over-five-years&catid=33:communiqu&Itemid=180](http://en.alkarama.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=192:saudi-arabia-mr-suleyman-al-alouane-arbitrarily-detained-for-over-five-years&catid=33:communiqu&Itemid=180)
- <sup>2</sup> <http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=1&article=248824&issueno=9383>
- <sup>3</sup> <http://www.alriyadh.com/2005/06/02/article69317.html>
- <sup>4</sup> <http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&article=173560&issueno=8948>
- <sup>5</sup> <http://aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&issueno=9121&article=203677&feature=>
- <sup>6</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-1E16E31moo>
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