

Advocacy dossier

Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja

عبد الهادي الخواجة

Imprisoned (serving sentence) **Bahrain**

Co-founder of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights, sentenced to life in prison after the 2011 uprising. Tortured, sexually assaulted, and held for over fifteen years. His health is critical; he risks permanent blindness without urgent surgery.

01
The case at a glance

Co-founder of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights, sentenced to life in prison after the 2011 uprising. Tortured, sexually assaulted, and held for over fifteen years. His health is critical; he risks permanent blindness without urgent surgery.

Status **Imprisoned (serving sentence)**	Arrested **9 Apr 2011**	Country **Bahrain**
Sentence Life imprisonment, upheld on final appeal 7 January 2013.		
Charges Financing and participating in terrorism aimed at overthrowing the government Spying for a foreign country Incitement to civil disobedience and violence Insulting a public servant (prison officer) Damaging property (breaking plastic chair during protest) Incitement to overthrow or alter the regime (2022, pending)		

What we ask

We call on the authorities to:

01 Release Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja immediately and unconditionally.

02 Drop all charges related to the peaceful exercise of fundamental rights.

03 Ensure unrestricted access to legal counsel, family, and adequate medical care while in detention.

04 Provide Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja with immediate, independent medical evaluation and the full treatment that condition requires, including transfer to an independent civilian hospital if necessary.

05 Immediately end all harassment, summons, surveillance, and threats against the family of Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja in Bahrain.

06 Immediately end all transnational targeting of Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja, including surveillance, defamation campaigns, Interpol misuse, and consular harassment.

02

Documented violations

Each violation and the international standard it breaks.

Arbitrary detention International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 9

Criminalisation of solidarity International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Articles 21, 22
UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, Article 5

Defamation and smear campaign International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 17
UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, Article 12

Denial of family visits UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (Nelson Mandela Rules), Rule 58

Denial of legal counsel International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 14(3)

Denial of medical care UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (Nelson Mandela Rules), Rules 24 to 27

Enforced disappearance International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, Article 2
International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Articles 9, 16

Gender based violence Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, General Recommendation No. 35
Convention against Torture, Article 1

Inhumane detention conditions International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 10
UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (Nelson Mandela Rules)

Judicial harassment UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, Articles 9, 12

Physical assault International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Articles 7, 9

Prolonged pretrial detention International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 9(3)

Reprisal against relatives UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, Article 12

Torture Convention against Torture, Articles 1, 2
International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 7

Transnational repression UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, Article 12

Trial before an exceptional court International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 14

Unfair trial International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 14

03

How the case unfolded

1991

Context

Granted political asylum in Denmark

He was granted political asylum in Denmark, where he lived in exile and founded the Bahrain Human Rights Organisation.

2001

Context

Returns to Bahrain under a general amnesty

He returned to Bahrain under a general amnesty.

September 2004

Arrest

Arrested after criticising the Prime Minister

He was arrested after publicly criticising the Prime Minister, and the Bahrain Center for Human Rights was closed down.

November 2004

Conviction

Sentenced to one year in prison

After a two month trial he was sentenced to one year in prison.

November 2004

Release

Released by royal pardon

He was released by royal pardon without serving the one year sentence.

February 2007

Arrest

Arrested and charged over political activity

He was arrested and charged with promoting political change through illegitimate means.

February 2007

Conditional release

Released on bail after protests

He was released on bail after public protests.

7 January 2009

Context

Charged over a speech and barred from travel

The Attorney General charged him over a speech in which he called the government oppressive, and he was placed under a travel ban.

9 April 2011

Arrest

Arrested at home by masked security forces

Fifteen masked men smashed down the door of his apartment with a sledgehammer in the early hours of the morning. They beat him until he lost consciousness and took him into custody along with his two sons-in-law.

9 April 2011

Ill-treatment

Held incommunicado and tortured

Authorities held him incommunicado for several weeks. He was subjected to severe beatings resulting in four facial fractures, sexual assault, forced stress positions, and psychological abuse.

9 April 2011

Context

Two sons-in-law arrested with him

His two sons-in-law were arrested with him at his daughter's home.

8 May 2011

Hearing

Trial opens before military tribunal

His trial commenced before the National Safety Court, a military tribunal. He stood trial alongside twenty other individuals and was charged with terrorism-related offenses and espionage despite the absence of evidence.

22 June 2011

Conviction

Sentenced to life imprisonment

The National Safety Court sentenced him to life imprisonment on charges of financing and participating in terrorism and spying for a foreign country.

2012

UN opinion or decision

UN Working Group finds his detention arbitrary

The UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention found his detention arbitrary in Opinion 6/2012.

8 February 2012

Hunger strike begins

Begins 110-day hunger strike

He began a hunger strike to protest his unjust detention and the harsh treatment he endured in prison. The strike lasted 110 days and caused severe health decline.

2 April 2012

Hearing

Court of Cassation begins review

The Bahraini Court of Cassation began reviewing his verdict and those of thirteen other defendants related to the 2011 protests.

30 April 2012

Hearing

Retrial ordered in civilian court, bail denied

The Court ordered a retrial in civilian court but denied bail, keeping Al-Khawaja detained during the proceedings.

28 May 2012

Hunger strike ends

Ends hunger strike after 110 days

He ended his hunger strike on its 110th day. From 23 April 2012 he had been force-fed by the authorities, and his health had severely declined.

4 September 2012

Appeal: judgment upheld

Appeals court upholds life sentence

An appeals court upheld his life sentence following the civilian retrial.

7 January 2013

Final judgment

Court of Cassation makes the sentence final

The Court of Cassation upheld the sentences in the Bahrain 13 case. No further appeal is possible.

2014

Context

Daughter Maryam arrested on arrival in Bahrain

His daughter Maryam Al-Khawaja was arrested on arrival in Bahrain.

2020

Family visit denied

Calls restricted; no family visit since January 2020

Restrictions were imposed on his phone calls with his family, whom he had not seen in person since January 2020.

16 November 2021

Hunger strike begins

Hunger strike demanding family contact

He launched a hunger strike demanding his fundamental right to communicate with his family. The protest caused his blood sugar to plummet to dangerously low levels.

30 November 2021

Hunger strike ends

Ends hunger strike after calls permitted

He ended the hunger strike after authorities permitted him to make phone calls to his family.

2022

Award or recognition

Named Martin Ennals Award laureate

He was named laureate of the Martin Ennals Award for Human Rights Defenders.

31 July 2022

Ill-treatment

Shackled despite spinal injury; protests

Despite a doctor's explicit order not to shackle him due to a spinal injury, authorities forced him into a small, unventilated bus and insisted on shackling him. In protest, he chanted slogans against the Interior Minister. He now faces charges of incitement to overthrow the regime stemming from this incident.

3 November 2022

Context

First hearing on new charges, in absentia

A hearing was held on new charges related to his protests in detention, including breaking a plastic chair and insulting a prison officer. He was not present.

16 November 2022

Context

Second hearing; pressured to record statement

He appeared before the Second Lower Criminal Court over allegations connected to his protests demanding the right to call his daughters. While held in a detention area, a lieutenant pressured him to record a video statement, which he refused.

21 November 2022

Context

Hearing on insulting public servant charge

Another hearing was scheduled on separate allegations, including insulting a public servant and insulting a foreign state (Israel). The latter charge was removed from official records following public exposure by his family.

28 November 2022

Context

Convicted without legal representation in a separate prison case

The judge convicted him on both charges without waiting for the power of attorney issue to be resolved. He was fined 100 Bahraini Dinars for insulting a police officer and 60 Dinars for breaking a plastic chair during a protest.

28 February 2023

Medical care denied

Suffers cardiac arrhythmia; care denied

He suffered a cardiac arrhythmia, a serious and potentially life-threatening condition, yet was denied adequate medical care for several months.

9 August 2023

Hunger strike begins

Begins hunger strike over medical neglect

He began another hunger strike at Jaw Prison to protest the harsh detention conditions and ongoing denial of medical treatment.

11 August 2023

Medical emergency

Hospitalized with cardiac complications

Two days into his hunger strike he was rushed to the intensive care unit of the BDF Hospital with heart problems. His family said the attending doctor declared his life in danger. After an intravenous injection stabilised his heart rhythm, he was returned to his cell.

September 2023

Reprisal against relatives

Daughter Maryam barred from flight to Bahrain

His daughter Maryam Al-Khawaja was barred from boarding a flight to Bahrain while trying to advocate for her father's release, illustrating the transnational dimension of reprisals against the family.

29 October 2025

Hunger strike begins

Begins hunger strike against prolonged detention

He began a hunger strike to protest his prolonged detention since 2011 and worsening prison conditions.

31 October 2025

Hunger strike ends

Suspends hunger strike

He suspended his hunger strike after two days, in response to a letter from the EU and a reply from the Danish Prime Minister, while continuing to support other hunger strikers in Jau prison.

28 November 2025

UN opinion or decision

UN Committee against Torture urges his release

In its concluding observations on Bahrain's fourth periodic report, issued after its 83rd session, the UN Committee against Torture expressed particular concern about his access to medical care and urged Bahrain to release him, noting that the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention had found his detention arbitrary.

9 February 2026

Call by others

British MPs table motion for sanctions on Bahrain's Interior Minister over torture

Ahead of the 15th anniversary of the 2011 uprising, cross-party MPs tabled an Early Day Motion supporting UK sanctions on Bahrain's Interior Minister over his role in torture. The Gulf Centre for Human Rights, which he co-founded, cited the torture he suffered in custody.

11 March 2026

Call by others

Urgent healthcare needs cited

Calls for immediate release renewed citing life-threatening cardiac conditions and ongoing denial of healthcare.

14 May 2026

Defender activity

Joins a joint appeal from Jau prison for the release of prisoners of conscience

18 August 2026

Other act

Left out of temporary home leave granted to 64 prisoners

Bahrain allowed 64 prisoners to leave Jau prison temporarily under its Open Prisons Programme. He was not among them, and Front Line Defenders said it was troubled that human rights defenders such as him remained excluded and called for his immediate and unconditional release.

3 September 2026

Call by others

Human Rights Watch urges the EU to seek his release in partnership talks

Human Rights Watch called on the European Union to use the Strategic Partnership Agreement negotiations it opened with Bahrain in July 2026 to secure his release, describing him as a Danish human rights defender imprisoned for more than 15 years.

04

The full story

Update, 12 November 2026: this record was checked against sources up to 26 October 2026. Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja remains in Jau prison serving a life sentence; he was left out of the temporary home leave granted to 64 prisoners in August 2026, and in September 2026 Human Rights Watch urged the EU to seek his release in its partnership talks with Bahrain. His Bahrain 13 co-defendants Abduljalil Al-Singace, Hassan Mushaima and Mohammed Habib Al-Muqdad also remain in prison, while Ebrahim Sharif was released in February 2026 after a separate case.

Background and Human Rights Work

Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja is a Bahraini human rights defender internationally recognized for his peaceful advocacy for civil and political rights, democratic reform, and accountability for human rights violations in Bahrain. He co-founded the Bahrain Center for Human Rights and the Gulf Centre for Human Rights. For decades, he documented abuses, defended victims of torture, and called for structural reforms aligned with international human rights standards.

During the mass protests of February and March 2011, which called for political reform and respect for fundamental freedoms, Al-Khawaja played a visible and peaceful leadership role. His human rights work and public advocacy placed him at the forefront of civil society mobilization and made him a primary target of state repression in the crackdown that followed.

The Arrest

In the early hours of 9 April 2011, fifteen masked men forcibly entered Al-Khawaja's apartment by smashing down the door with a sledgehammer. They violently beat him until he lost consciousness. He was taken into custody along with his two sons-in-law. Authorities held him incommunicado for several weeks and subjected him to torture.

As a result of the beatings, Al-Khawaja sustained four fractures to his face, requiring a four-hour surgery to reconstruct his jaw. He was also subjected to sexual abuse and forced to stand for hours with his hands raised above his head. The torture included severe psychological abuse and humiliation.

Legal Proceedings

On 8 May 2011, Al-Khawaja's trial commenced before the National Safety Court, a military tribunal. He stood trial alongside twenty other individuals. Despite the absence of evidence against him, he was charged with financing and participating in terrorism aimed at overthrowing the government, as well as spying for a foreign country.

On 22 June 2011, he was sentenced to life imprisonment. On 2 April 2012, the Bahraini Court of Cassation began reviewing his verdict and those of thirteen other defendants. On 30 April 2012, the Court ordered a retrial in civilian court but denied bail, keeping Al-Khawaja detained during the proceedings.

On 4 September 2012, an appeals court upheld his life sentence. On 7 January 2013, Bahrain's highest appeals court confirmed both his conviction and life imprisonment sentence. The judicial process fell far

short of international fair trial standards. Proceedings relied on statements obtained under torture, were conducted before military courts lacking independence, and systematically denied the defendant access to legal counsel during key phases.

Hunger Strikes and Medical Neglect

On 8 February 2012, Al-Khawaja began a hunger strike to protest his unjust detention and the harsh treatment he endured in prison. The strike lasted 110 days. His health severely declined, and from 23 April he was force-fed by the authorities. He ended the hunger strike on 28 May 2012.

In November 2021, Al-Khawaja launched another hunger strike demanding his fundamental right to communicate with his family. The protest caused his blood sugar to plummet to dangerously low levels. He ended the strike only after authorities permitted him to make phone calls.

In February 2023, Al-Khawaja suffered a cardiac arrhythmia, a serious and potentially life-threatening condition. He was denied adequate medical care for several months. On 9 August 2023, he began another hunger strike at Jaw Prison to protest the harsh detention conditions and ongoing denial of medical treatment. Within two days, he was hospitalized with life-threatening cardiac complications. His family said the attending doctor declared his life in danger. After an intravenous injection stabilised his heart rhythm, he was returned to his cell without further information about his condition.

Detention Conditions and Ongoing Violations

Throughout his detention, Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja has been subjected to systematic medical neglect, which constitutes cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment under international human rights standards. He currently suffers from chronic and severe pain, ongoing cardiac complications, and suspected glaucoma requiring urgent surgical intervention. Without treatment, he faces a serious risk of irreversible blindness.

In late July 2022, despite a doctor's explicit order not to shackle him due to a spinal injury, authorities forced Al-Khawaja into a small, unventilated bus with hard metal seats and insisted on shackling him. In protest, he chanted slogans against the Interior Minister, condemning the inhumane treatment. He now faces a third criminal case accusing him of incitement to overthrow or alter the regime, stemming from this incident. No court date has been set.

In November 2022, Al-Khawaja faced new court hearings on multiple charges related to his activism, including protests against unjust treatment while imprisoned in Jaw Prison. On 3 November 2022, a hearing was held without his attendance. On 16 November 2022, he appeared before the Second Lower Criminal Court over allegations connected to his protests demanding the right to call his daughters living abroad. The hearing was postponed to 28 November 2022. Another hearing was scheduled for 21 November 2022 on separate allegations, including insulting a public servant and insulting a foreign state (Israel), though the latter charge was removed from official records following public exposure by his family.

Al-Khawaja was absent from his trials and could not grant power of attorney to his appointed lawyer, despite a court order requiring the Ministry of Interior to facilitate this. He had no legal representation during the trials. Although his lawyers were present, they were denied access to his legal dossier and unable to represent him formally. Despite these due process violations, the judge convicted Al-Khawaja on both charges without waiting for the power of attorney issue to be resolved.

The charges allege that a year prior, while detained in Jaw Prison and being denied the right to call his exiled daughters, Al-Khawaja broke a plastic chair and verbally insulted a prison officer. He insisted on his right to communicate with his children, stating: "I have the right to call my kids."

In the first case, he was fined 100 Bahraini Dinars (approximately £220 / $266) for insulting a police officer at Jaw Prison. In the second case, he was fined 60 Bahraini Dinars (£133 / $160) for breaking a plastic chair during a protest after being denied contact with his daughters in exile, injuring his hand in the process.

While held in a detention area during the November 2022 proceedings, a lieutenant pressured him to record a video statement. He refused and was returned to his cell. His daughter, Zainab Al-Khawaja, stated: "They are threatening and intimidating him to coerce false and misleading statements, forcing him to testify on video that he did not want to attend his trial. This is a clear violation of his judicial rights and further evidence of ongoing reprisals against him."

International Response and Family Impact

Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja holds dual Bahraini-Danish citizenship. Denmark has failed to secure his release for more than fifteen years, despite his deteriorating health and the grave violations documented throughout his detention.

His daughters, Maryam and Zainab Al-Khawaja, have themselves been targeted for their activism. Zainab was arrested from her home along with her young child. Maryam was barred from boarding a flight to Bahrain in September 2023 while trying to advocate for her father's release. The family has lived under exile and constant harassment for over a decade.

Al-Khawaja's case represents one of the most egregious examples of prolonged arbitrary detention combined with torture, sexual violence, and medical negligence in the Gulf region. His continued imprisonment in the face of a life-threatening health condition places him at imminent risk of death or irreversible harm, including permanent blindness.

Latest updates on this case Scan the code or visit: https://humena.org/defenders/abdulhadi-al-khawaja/

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