

Advocacy dossier

Dr. Hadef Al-Owais

هادف راشد العويس

Imprisoned (serving sentence) **United Arab Emirates**

Dr. Hadef Al-Owais taught law at UAE University and sat on the International Court of Arbitration. He has been imprisoned since 2012 for signing a reform petition, convicted twice in mass trials, and held beyond his sentence under counter-terrorism laws.

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The case at a glance

Dr. Hadef Al-Owais taught law at UAE University and sat on the International Court of Arbitration. He has been imprisoned since 2012 for signing a reform petition, convicted twice in mass trials, and held beyond his sentence under counter-terrorism laws.

Status	Arrested	Country
Imprisoned (serving sentence)	**18 Jul 2023**	**United Arab Emirates**

Sentence Life imprisonment (25 years under UAE law) in the UAE84 case, 10 July 2024, final since 4 March 2025. This follows a ten-year sentence with three years of probation in the UAE94 case, whose prison term ended in September 2022. He has been held since September 2012.

Charges Founding, organising, and administering an organisation aimed at overthrowing the government (UAE94 trial, 2013)
Establishing, founding, and managing the Justice and Dignity Committee with the aim of committing terrorist acts (UAE84 trial, 2024)

What we ask

We call on the authorities to:

01 Release Dr. Hadef Al-Owais 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 Dr. Hadef Al-Owais with immediate, independent medical evaluation and the full treatment that condition requires, including transfer to an independent civilian hospital if necessary.

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Documented violations

Each violation and the international standard it breaks.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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How the case unfolded

March 2011

Defender activity

Signed the petition calling for democratic reform

One of 133 Emirati professionals, judges, academics, lawyers and students, who addressed the President and the Federal Supreme Council asking for expanded legislative powers for the Federal National Council and direct election of its members.

11 September 2012

Arrest

Detained in the campaign of arrests that followed the petition

Detained in September 2012. He has not been free since.

27 January 2013

Charge filed

Charged under Penal Code Article 180

He and 93 others were charged with founding, organising and administering an organisation aimed at overthrowing the government.

4 March 2013

Hearing

UAE94 trial opens

The UAE94 mass trial opened before the State Security Chamber of the Federal Supreme Court.

2 July 2013

Conviction

Sentenced to ten years in prison in the UAE94 trial

He was sentenced to ten years in prison followed by three years of probation, with no right of appeal.

22 November 2013

UN opinion or decision

UN Working Group finds UAE94 detentions arbitrary (Opinion 60/2013)

The UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention found the detention of the convicted UAE94 defendants arbitrary.

September 2022

Detention beyond the end of a sentence

Held past the end of his sentence under a rehabilitation pretext

His original ten-year sentence ended in 2022. Instead of release he was transferred to a facility run by the State Security Apparatus and held on the stated ground of rehabilitation needs.

18 July 2023

Start of enforced disappearance

Last call to his family from al-Razeen prison; contact then stops

He made his last phone call to his family from al-Razeen prison. His family then had no contact with him or information on his whereabouts until December 2023.

12 September 2023

Context

UN body on disappearances asked about his whereabouts

The UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances was asked to act on his fate and whereabouts.

1 December 2023

Reappearance in custody

Calls his family from an unnamed State Security facility

After months without contact, he called his family from an unidentified State Security facility.

7 December 2023

Hearing

UAE84 trial opens before the Abu Dhabi Federal Court of Appeal

His new mass trial on terrorism charges concerning an alleged Justice and Dignity Committee (Case 87 of 2023) opened, after he had already served the sentence imposed in the 2013 mass trial.

10 July 2024

Conviction

Sentenced to life, twenty-five years under UAE law

Sentenced to life imprisonment for founding an organisation accused of planning terrorist acts.

30 July 2024

Statement by UN experts

UN experts dismayed at UAE84 life sentences

UN human rights experts expressed dismay at the life sentences in the UAE84 case and named him among those sentenced.

4 March 2025

Final judgment

Federal Supreme Court makes the sentence final

The State Security Chamber of the Federal Supreme Court rejected the appeals in the UAE84 case. The judgment is final.

26 June 2025

Other act

Federal Supreme Court gives life sentences to 24 co-defendants in the UAE84 case

On appeal by the Attorney General, the Criminal Chamber of the Federal Supreme Court overturned the dismissal of the cases against 24 co-defendants and sentenced them to life imprisonment, bringing the life sentences in the case to 67. The ruling concerned those 24 defendants; no source reports a change to his own sentence.

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The full story

Update, 12 November 2026: this record was checked again. Hadef Al-Owais remains in detention, serving the life sentence imposed in the UAE84 mass trial on 10 July 2024, which became final when the Federal Supreme Court rejected the appeals on 4 March 2025; his place of detention has not been publicly confirmed since he called his family from a State Security facility on 1 December 2023, and no release has been reported. Human Rights Watch reported that after UAE94 prisoner Ali al-Khaja died in custody at al-Razeen prison on 19 November 2025, families of other political detainees there were not allowed to visit.

Background and Work

Dr. Hadef Rashid Abdullah Nasser Al-Owais is a legal scholar and human rights lawyer who held senior academic and international positions before his arrest. He completed a master's degree in law at Harvard University in 1985 and obtained his doctorate from the University of Durham in the United Kingdom. He served as Head of the Law Department at the College of Sharia at UAE University and was a member of the International Court of Arbitration, contributing to the resolution of commercial disputes across borders.

Dr. Al-Owais was also active in civil society through his membership in the Society of Reform and Social Guidance, commonly known as the Al-Islah Society. The organisation, which combined social services with advocacy for political participation, became a focal point for government crackdowns following the Arab Spring.

The Petition and the UAE94 Case

In March 2011, a group of 133 Emirati citizens, including academics, judges, lawyers, students, and human rights defenders, signed a petition addressed to the President of the United Arab Emirates and the Federal Supreme Council. The document called for democratic reforms, including direct elections and greater legislative authority for the Federal National Council. Rather than engaging with the demands, the State Security Apparatus initiated a campaign of arrests targeting the signatories.

Dr. Al-Owais was arrested on 11 September 2012 as part of what became known as the UAE94 mass trial. On 27 January 2013, ninety-four defendants were charged with founding, organising, and administering an organisation aimed at overthrowing the government, under Article 180 of the Penal Code. The trial took place before the Federal Supreme Court, a venue that offers no right of appeal. On 2 July 2013, sixty-one of the ninety-four defendants were convicted. Dr. Al-Owais received a sentence of ten years' imprisonment followed by three years of probation.

Extended Detention and the UAE84 Retrial

Dr. Al-Owais's sentence was due to end in September 2022. He was not released. Instead, authorities invoked the Counter-Terrorism Law and the Munasaha Centre Law, legislation that permits indefinite detention on the grounds of "rehabilitation needs", and transferred him to a facility operated by the State Security Apparatus. This legal mechanism has been used to hold multiple UAE94 defendants

beyond the expiry of their sentences.

On 7 December 2023, Dr. Al-Owais appeared before the Abu Dhabi Federal Court of Appeal in a new mass trial involving eighty-four defendants. He faced fresh terrorism charges, accused of founding and managing the Justice and Dignity Committee with the aim of committing terrorist acts on UAE soil. On 10 July 2024, the court sentenced him to life imprisonment, equivalent under UAE law to twenty-five years.

Detention Conditions and Contact with Family

Throughout his detention, Dr. Al-Owais has been subjected to ill-treatment. He has been denied family visits for extended periods and deprived of adequate medical care. He has been placed repeatedly in solitary confinement, a practice that amounts to psychological torture when prolonged or indefinite.

On 1 December 2023, he was able to call his family from an unknown facility belonging to the State Security Apparatus. This was a rare instance of contact. The location of his current detention remains undisclosed, and his access to legal counsel and family remains severely restricted.

International Response

The UAE94 and UAE84 trials have drawn sustained criticism from international human rights organisations, UN special rapporteurs, and foreign governments. The proceedings have been condemned for violations of fair trial standards, including lack of access to legal counsel, reliance on confessions allegedly extracted under duress, and the use of counter-terrorism legislation to criminalise peaceful advocacy.

Dr. Al-Owais's case exemplifies the pattern of arbitrary detention and judicial harassment faced by those who called for political reform in the UAE. His continued imprisonment, despite having completed his original sentence, underscores the use of indefinite detention mechanisms as a tool of political repression.

Latest updates on this case Scan the code or visit: https://humena.org/defenders/dr-hadef-al-owais/

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