

Advocacy dossier

Maryam Al-Khawaja

مريم الخواجة

At liberty **Bahrain**

Maryam Al-Khawaja is a Bahraini and Danish human rights defender, former co-director of the Gulf Centre for Human Rights and daughter of the imprisoned defender Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja. She lives in exile in Denmark, facing a one-year prison sentence passed in her absence in 2014 and four further cases in Bahrain.

01
The case at a glance

Maryam Al-Khawaja is a Bahraini and Danish human rights defender, former co-director of the Gulf Centre for Human Rights and daughter of the imprisoned defender Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja. She lives in exile in Denmark, facing a one-year prison sentence passed in her absence in 2014 and four further cases in Bahrain.

Status **At liberty**	Arrested **30 Aug 2014**	Country **Bahrain**
Sentence One year in prison, imposed in absentia on 1 December 2014 for assaulting police officers.		
Charges Assaulting police officers (2014, convicted in absentia) Insulting the king (2014) Four further cases pending as of September 2023, details not published		

What we ask

We call on the authorities to:

01 Quash the conviction and drop any charges that remain on record against Maryam Al-Khawaja in connection with peaceful human rights work.

02 Confirm publicly that Maryam Al-Khawaja faces no residual travel, financial, or professional restriction arising from this case.

03 Guarantee that Maryam Al-Khawaja can resume that work without surveillance, summons, or further reprisal.

04 Provide effective remedy for the period of deprivation of liberty already served.

02

How the case unfolded

30 August 2014

Arrest

Arrested on arrival at Bahrain International Airport

Maryam Al-Khawaja was arrested on arrival at Bahrain International Airport in Manama, where she had travelled from Denmark to visit her imprisoned father, Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja, who was on hunger strike. She was questioned by the Public Prosecutor but refused to answer because she was not allowed to speak to her lawyer.

31 August 2014

Charge filed

Charged with insulting the king and assaulting police officers

Al Jazeera reported on 31 August 2014 that she had been charged with insulting the king and assaulting police officers, the latter relating to an alleged assault on officers while she was being searched at the airport.

18 September 2014

Conditional release

Released on bail pending trial

She was released on bail after nearly three weeks in detention. The charges remained in place and she was initially barred from leaving the country.

2 October 2014

Travel ban lifted

Travel ban lifted; leaves Bahrain as trial continues

The travel ban was lifted and she left Bahrain while her trial continued. On 30 November 2014 she announced that she would boycott the trial, citing the lack of judicial independence and the violations during her interrogation.

1 December 2014

Ruling in absentia

Sentenced in absentia to one year in prison

A Bahraini court sentenced her in absentia to one year in prison for allegedly assaulting police officers. She said the verdict would not stop her work.

14 September 2023

Other act

Announces return to Bahrain despite sentence and four pending cases

Ahead of a planned trip to press for her father's release, she told AFP that she expected to be arrested on arrival, since she faced the 2014 one-year sentence and four further pending cases. Amnesty International's Secretary General, Agnès Callamard, who was to accompany her, called the charges ludicrous. A government spokesperson said only that people convicted by a court are subject to legal proceedings and due process.

15 September 2023

Other act

Barred from boarding a flight to Bahrain at Heathrow

British Airways prevented her from boarding a flight from London Heathrow to Bahrain. Four members of her delegation were also refused check-in: Agnès Callamard of Amnesty International, Olive Moore and Andrew Anderson of Front Line Defenders, and Timothy Whyte of ActionAid Denmark. Amnesty International called it an attempt by the Bahraini authorities to stop people speaking out.

19 February 2024

Other act

Announces cancer diagnosis and begins sit-ins in Copenhagen

She announced that she had stage 3 Hodgkin's lymphoma and began sit-ins outside the Danish Prime Minister's office in Copenhagen to call for her father's release. The Gulf Centre for Human Rights later reported that she was in remission.

3 April 2026

Other act

Speaks from exile on the 2026 crackdown in Bahrain

Speaking to the Associated Press from abroad, she described the wave of arrests in Bahrain since the outbreak of the 2026 war with Iran as more heavy-handed than in recent years. She remains in exile in Denmark, with the 2014 sentence and further cases outstanding, while her father remains in prison serving a life sentence.

03

The full story

Update, 12 November 2026: Maryam Al-Khawaja lives in exile in Denmark. A one-year prison sentence passed in her absence in 2014 and further cases remain against her in Bahrain, and she continues to campaign for the release of her father, Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja, who is serving a life sentence.

Background and Work

Maryam Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja is a Bahraini and Danish human rights defender and a women's rights advocate. She is the daughter of Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja, co-founder of the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights and the Gulf Centre for Human Rights, and the sister of the activist Zainab Al-Khawaja. Her family received political asylum in Denmark when she was a child and returned to Bahrain in 2001. She graduated from the University of Bahrain in 2009 and joined the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights in 2010, where she headed its foreign relations office, became its vice president and acted as its president while Nabeel Rajab was detained.

She later became co-director of the Gulf Centre for Human Rights, and has worked with Frida, the Young Feminist Fund, and Physicians for Human Rights. She has served on the boards of CIVICUS and the International Service for Human Rights, and since 2022 has led the campaign for her father's release. During the 2011 protests she reported from Pearl Roundabout in Manama and briefed the US Congress and the UN Human Rights Council. In 2023 the BBC named her one of its 100 Women.

The Arrest

Her father was arrested on 9 April 2011 and sentenced to life imprisonment by a military court in June 2011. On 30 August 2014, when she travelled from Denmark to visit him while he was on hunger strike, she was arrested on arrival at Bahrain International Airport. Al Jazeera reported that she was charged with insulting the king and assaulting police officers; the assault charge related to an alleged incident while she was being searched. She was questioned by the Public Prosecutor but refused to answer because she was not allowed to speak to her lawyer.

Legal Proceedings

She was released on bail on 18 September 2014. Her travel ban was lifted and she left Bahrain on 2 October 2014 while the trial continued. On 30 November 2014 she said she would boycott the trial, citing the lack of judicial independence and the violations during her interrogation. On 1 December 2014 a court sentenced her in absentia to one year in prison for assaulting police officers. She said the verdict would not stop her work.

In September 2023 she told AFP that, besides the 2014 sentence, four further cases were pending against her and that she expected to be arrested on arrival. The details of those cases have not been published by the sources reviewed. The Bahraini government said only that people convicted by a court are subject to legal proceedings and due process.

Exile and Campaigning

On 15 September 2023 British Airways prevented her from boarding a flight from London Heathrow to Bahrain, where she planned to press for her father's

release while he was on hunger strike. Four members of her delegation were also refused check-in: Agnès Callamard, Secretary General of Amnesty International; Olive Moore and Andrew Anderson, current and former directors of Front Line Defenders; and Timothy Whyte of ActionAid Denmark. On 19 February 2024 she announced that she had stage 3 Hodgkin's lymphoma and began sit-ins outside the Danish Prime Minister's office in Copenhagen; the Gulf Centre for Human Rights later reported that she was in remission. In April 2026 she told the Associated Press that the arrests in Bahrain since the outbreak of war with Iran were more heavy-handed than in recent years.

International Response

When she was sentenced in December 2014, Amnesty International recalled that her father, whom it considers a prisoner of conscience, was serving a life sentence. Agnès Callamard called the 2023 refusal to let the delegation board a shameless attempt to stop people speaking out. Human Rights Watch wrote in March 2024 that years of private diplomacy by Denmark and the European Union had failed her father. In June 2026 the Gulf Centre for Human Rights reported that Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja, by then imprisoned for 15 years, had been excluded from recent amnesties and that his health had deteriorated.

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

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