

ADVOCACY DOSSIER

MOHAMMED AL-OTAIBI

محمد العتيبي

Imprisoned (serving sentence) **Saudi Arabia**

Mohammed Al-Otaibi co-founded the Union for Human Rights in Riyadh. He fled to Qatar in 2017 to escape prosecution and was deported from Doha airport just days later. He is now serving seventeen years in Dammam.

HuMENA.

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Case reference HM-SA-2017-002

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THE CASE AT A GLANCE

Mohammed Al-Otaibi co-founded the Union for Human Rights in Riyadh. He fled to Qatar in 2017 to escape prosecution and was deported from Doha airport just days later. He is now serving seventeen years in Dammam.

STATUS	**Imprisoned (serving sentence)**
ARRESTED	**28 May 2017**
COUNTRY	**Saudi Arabia**
SENTENCE	**Seventeen years in prison (fourteen years from the first trial, plus an additional three years imposed on appeal in the second trial).**
CHARGES	**Illegally founding an association** **Spreading chaos and stirring up public opinion against the state** **Harming the reputation of the Kingdom before the international community** **Publishing statements on the internet harmful to the reputation of the Kingdom and its judicial and security institutions, with the intention of dividing national unity** **Publishing hostile posts on Twitter insulting the Kingdom and the religious authority and aimed at disrupting the social order** **Fleeing justice** **Going to Qatar** **Communicating with foreign entities** **Interfering in public affairs**

WE CALL ON THE AUTHORITIES TO:

WHAT WE ASK

01 Release Mohammed Al-Otaibi 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 Mohammed Al-Otaibi 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 transnational targeting of Mohammed Al-Otaibi, including surveillance, defamation campaigns, Interpol misuse, and consular harassment.

06 Immediately lift the travel ban imposed on Mohammed Al-Otaibi and on any family members affected by the same order.

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

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DOCUMENTED VIOLATIONS

	INTERNATIONAL STANDARD
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
Forced exile	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 12(4)
Forced return / refoulement	Convention against Torture, Article 3
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
Travel ban	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 12
Unfair trial	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 14
Unlawful surveillance	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 17

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HOW THE CASE UNFOLDED

1 January 2009

ARREST

First arrest for Gaza advocacy

Al-Otaibi was arrested over a peaceful protest against the siege of Gaza. He was sentenced to three years in prison and a five-year travel ban, and remained imprisoned for almost three years and seven months.

September 2011

CONTEXT

UN Working Group finds his detention arbitrary

The UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention found his 2009 arrest and detention arbitrary.

2013

DEFENDER ACTIVITY

Co-founds Union for Human Rights

Al-Otaibi co-founded the Union for Human Rights in Riyadh. The organisation worked to abolish the death penalty and strengthen women's role in Saudi society.

2013

INVESTIGATION OPENED

Criminal investigation opened

Shortly after the Union for Human Rights was established, the Public Prosecution launched a criminal investigation into its founding members.

March 2014

SURVEILLANCE DETECTED

Summoned and forced to sign pledge

Al-Otaibi was summoned by the Public Prosecution and required to sign a pledge to stop participating in television interviews and issuing reports. He was then placed under surveillance including of his social media accounts.

30 October 2016

SUMMONS

Summoned by Special Criminal Court

The Special Criminal Court summoned Al-Otaibi and charged him with illegally founding an association, spreading chaos, harming the reputation of the Kingdom, and publishing hostile posts on Twitter.

30 March 2017

DEPARTURE INTO EXILE

Flees to Qatar

To avoid prosecution for his human rights work, Al-Otaibi fled to Qatar, where he obtained refugee status and was scheduled for resettlement in Norway.

24 May 2017

ARREST

Arrested at Doha airport

Al-Otaibi was arrested at Hamad International Airport in Doha as he prepared to board a flight to Oslo.

28 May 2017

ARREST

Deported to Saudi Arabia

Al-Otaibi was deported to Saudi Arabia. Upon arrival, General Intelligence officers arrested him and transferred him to Al Mabahith prison in Dammam. He was held incommunicado for two weeks and placed in solitary confinement for three months.

25 January 2018

CONVICTION

Sentenced to 14 years

The Special Criminal Court sentenced Al-Otaibi to fourteen years in prison. He was denied access to a lawyer during the trial.

22 February 2018

APPEAL OUTCOME

Appeal rejected

Al-Otaibi appealed his fourteen-year sentence, but the decision was upheld.

25 July 2019

HEARING

Brought to court for new trial

Al-Otaibi was brought back before the court for a new trial on additional charges including fleeing justice, going to Qatar, communicating with foreign entities, and interfering in public affairs.

14 October 2019

CHARGE FILED

Four new charges added

Four new charges were brought against him, including going to Qatar and interfering in public affairs.

December 2020

CONVICTION

Additional one-year sentence imposed

The court handed down an additional one-year prison sentence on Al-Otaibi in the second trial.

11 January 2021

HUNGER STRIKE BEGINS

Begins hunger strike

Al-Otaibi began a hunger strike in the General Intelligence Prison in Al-Dhamam, demanding transfer to a facility closer to his family and proper medical care for his high blood pressure.

31 January 2021

HUNGER STRIKE ENDS

Ends hunger strike

Al-Otaibi ended his hunger strike after more than two weeks. His demands for transfer and adequate medical treatment remain unmet.

April 2021

APPEAL: SENTENCE INCREASED

Sentence increased to 17 years on appeal

On appeal, the additional sentence was increased from one year to three years, bringing Al-Otaibi's total prison term to seventeen years.

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THE FULL STORY

Background and Work

Mohammed Al-Otaibi has worked in the Saudi human rights movement since 1996. Between 1999 and 2016 he participated in online discussions and forums on civil and political rights. From 2006 onward he signed collective statements demanding the release of prisoners of conscience and calling for political reform in the Kingdom.

In early 2009, while promoting the rights of Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, Saudi authorities arrested him for the first time. He remained imprisoned for almost three years and seven months. After his release, in 2013, he co-founded the Union for Human Rights in Riyadh. The organisation's objectives included the abolition of the death penalty and strengthening the role of women in Saudi society. For three years Al-Otaibi worked with the Union, issuing international appeals to document human rights violations committed by the Saudi government. Throughout this period the government subjected the organisation and its members to constant harassment.

Investigation and Flight

Shortly after the Union for Human Rights was established in 2013, the Public Prosecution launched a criminal investigation into its founding members. Al-Otaibi and other activists were summoned on charges of co-founding an illegal association. In March 2014 he was summoned again for questioning by the Public Prosecution and required to sign a pledge to stop participating in television interviews and issuing reports and statements. The Prosecution then placed him under surveillance, including monitoring his social media accounts, without informing him.

On 30 October 2016, the Special Criminal Court summoned Al-Otaibi and formally charged him with illegally founding an association, spreading chaos and stirring up public opinion against the state, harming the reputation of the Kingdom before the international community and human rights bodies, and publishing hostile posts on Twitter that insulted the Kingdom and the religious authority. The charges alleged that he prepared, signed, and published statements on the internet with the intention of dividing national unity and disrupting the social order.

On 30 March 2017, in order to avoid prosecution for his human rights work, Al-Otaibi fled to Qatar. He obtained refugee status and was scheduled for resettlement in Norway as part of a UN protection programme.

Arrest and Deportation

On 24 May 2017, officers arrested Al-Otaibi at Hamad International Airport in Doha as he was preparing to board a flight to Oslo. Four days later, on 28 May 2017, he was deported to Saudi Arabia. Upon arrival, officers of the General Directorate of Investigation, commonly known as Al Mabahith, arrested him and

transferred him to the Al Mabahith detention facility in Dammam. He was held incommunicado for two weeks following his arrest and placed in solitary confinement for three months.

Legal Proceedings

On 25 January 2018, the Special Criminal Court sentenced Al-Otaibi to fourteen years in prison. He was denied access to a lawyer during the trial. On 22 February 2018, he appealed the decision, but the sentence was upheld.

On 25 July 2019, Al-Otaibi was brought back before the court for a new trial. He faced additional charges of fleeing justice, going to Qatar, communicating with foreign entities, and interfering in public affairs. In December 2020 the court handed down an additional one-year prison sentence. He appealed, and in April 2021 the sentence was increased on appeal to three years. His total sentence now stands at seventeen years in prison.

Detention Conditions and Health

Al-Otaibi is held in the Al Mabahith prison in Dammam, far from his family in Jeddah. In 2019 prison authorities denied him telephone contact with his family during the holy month of Ramadan. He has been permitted only one family visit every forty-five days.

He suffers from high blood pressure. Prison administrators have denied him access to suitable medication for his condition. On 11 January 2021, Al-Otaibi began a hunger strike in the General Intelligence Prison in Al-Dhamam. He demanded to be moved to a prison closer to his family in Jeddah and to receive proper medical care for his blood pressure. He ended the hunger strike on 31 January 2021, after nearly three weeks. His demands for transfer and adequate medical treatment remain unmet.

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SAMPLE LETTER

Copy it, adapt it and send it from your own address.

Your Excellency,

I am writing to demand the immediate release of Mohammed Al-Otaibi, human rights defender and co-founder of the Union for Human Rights, an organisation advocating for the abolition of the death penalty and strengthening women's role in Saudi society, currently detained in Saudi Arabia since 28 May 2017, and an end to all reprisals tied to this case.

In brief: Mohammed Al-Otaibi co-founded the Union for Human Rights in Riyadh. He fled to Qatar in 2017 to escape prosecution and was deported from Doha airport just days later. He is now serving seventeen years in Dammam.

I respectfully urge your authorities to:
1. Release Mohammed Al-Otaibi immediately and unconditionally;
2. Drop all charges related to the peaceful exercise of fundamental rights;
3. Ensure unrestricted access to legal counsel, family, and adequate medical care while in detention;
4. Provide Mohammed Al-Otaibi with immediate, independent medical evaluation and the full treatment that condition requires, including transfer to an independent civilian hospital if necessary;
5. Immediately end all transnational targeting of Mohammed Al-Otaibi, including surveillance, defamation campaigns, Interpol misuse, and consular harassment;
6. Immediately lift the travel ban imposed on Mohammed Al-Otaibi and on any family members affected by the same order.

I will continue to monitor this case until Mohammed Al-Otaibi is free.

Respectfully,

[Your name]
[Your city, country]
8 November 2026