

Advocacy dossier

Raif Badawi

رائف بدوى

At liberty **Saudi Arabia**

Raif Badawi, a Saudi blogger and co-founder of Free Saudi Liberals, served ten years in prison for posts about free speech and pluralism. He was sentenced to 1,000 lashes, fined one million riyals, and released in 2022 subject to a travel ban.

01
The case at a glance

Raif Badawi, a Saudi blogger and co-founder of Free Saudi Liberals, served ten years in prison for posts about free speech and pluralism. He was sentenced to 1,000 lashes, fined one million riyals, and released in 2022 subject to a travel ban.

Status	Arrested	Country
At liberty	**17 Jun 2012**	**Saudi Arabia**

Sentence: Ten years in prison, one thousand lashes (fifty administered, remainder suspended), fine of one million Saudi riyals, ten-year ban on internet use after release, and ten-year travel ban after release.

Charges: Insulting Islam through electronic channels
Apostasy (later dropped or not pursued)

What we ask

We call on the authorities to:

01 Immediately end all harassment, summons, surveillance, and threats against the family of Raif Badawi in Saudi Arabia.

02 Cease the use of family members as leverage to pressure Raif Badawi into silence.

03 Drop any fabricated charges against family members and unblock their travel, financial, and professional rights.

04 Comply with the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, which explicitly prohibits reprisals against the families of defenders.

05 Immediately lift the travel ban imposed on Raif Badawi and on any family members affected by the same order.

02

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

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

Press freedom violation International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 19

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

Travel ban International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 12

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

03

How the case unfolded

March 2008

Arrest

Detained and questioned after founding the website

Soon after he set up the Free Saudi Liberals website, he was detained and questioned over accusations linked to apostasy and his online writing.

March 2008

Release

Released after questioning

He was released after questioning. Prosecutors later dropped the 2008 accusations.

2009

Travel ban imposed

Barred from travel; assets frozen

The authorities barred him from leaving Saudi Arabia, and his and his wife's bank accounts were reported frozen.

17 June 2012

Arrest

Arrest in Jeddah

Raif Badawi was arrested in Jeddah on charges of insulting Islam through electronic channels.

July 2013

Conviction

First sentence

A criminal court sentenced Badawi to seven years in prison and six hundred lashes. The sentence was later appealed and overturned.

7 May 2014

Conviction

Retrial and harsher sentence

After a retrial, Badawi was sentenced to ten years in prison, one thousand lashes, a fine of one million Saudi riyals, a ban on internet use for ten years, and a ten-year travel ban.

9 January 2015

Torture

Public flogging outside mosque

Badawi was flogged fifty times in public outside Al Juffali Mosque in Jeddah after Friday prayers. The remaining lashes were postponed indefinitely following international condemnation.

7 June 2015

Final judgment

Supreme Court makes the sentence final

The Supreme Court upheld the sentence of ten years and 1,000 lashes. The judgment is final.

4 September 2015

Other act

UN Working Group finds his detention arbitrary

In Opinion 38/2015, adopted on 4 September 2015, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention found the detention of nine Saudi human rights defenders, including Raif Badawi, his lawyer Waleed Abu al-Khair and Mohammed al-Qahtani, to be arbitrary and called for their release.

30 July 2018

Context

Sister Samar Badawi arrested

His sister Samar Badawi, a women's rights defender, was arrested. She was released in June 2021 after her sentence expired.

17 September 2019

Hunger strike begins

Hunger strike begins

Badawi began an open-ended hunger strike in protest of the confiscation of his books and medication and worsening detention conditions.

21 September 2019

Hunger strike ends

Hunger strike ends

Badawi ended his hunger strike after receiving a visit from the Saudi Human Rights Commission.

1 March 2022

Detention beyond the end of a sentence

Held beyond the end of his sentence

Amnesty International said his ten-year prison sentence ended on 1 March 2022, but he remained in custody until 11 March 2022.

11 March 2022

Release

Released after full sentence

Raif Badawi was released from Buraiman Prison after serving the full ten years.

11 March 2022

Travel ban imposed

Ten-year travel ban from his 2014 sentence takes effect on his release

The Interior Ministry confirmed the ten-year travel ban from his 2014 sentence, which can be lifted only by royal pardon. A ten-year ban on media use also applies.

12 May 2025

Other act

Rights groups say the travel ban still separates him from his family

A joint statement by press freedom and human rights organisations, including ALQST, CPJ and RSF, said that he cannot reunite with his family in Canada because of a ten-year travel ban imposed after his release in 2022.

04

The full story

Update, 12 November 2026: this record was checked against current sources. Badawi has been out of prison since 11 March 2022, but in May 2025 a joint statement by ALQST, CPJ, RSF and other groups said he still cannot rejoin his family in Canada because of a ten-year travel ban; no source reports that the ban has been lifted. His sister, the women's rights defender Samar Badawi, was herself imprisoned from 2018 to 2021, and the 2015 UN opinion that found his detention arbitrary also covered Mohammed Fahd Al-Qahtani.

Background and Work

Raif Badawi created the Free Saudi Liberals website in 2008 as a forum for open discussion of religion, politics, and society. In 2008 he was detained and questioned over accusations linked to apostasy, then released, and in 2009 he was barred from travel and his assets were frozen. The site published essays and hosted debates on topics the Saudi state considered off-limits: secularism, the separation of religion from law, and abuses by the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, commonly known as the religious police. Badawi moderated discussions and contributed his own writing. He advocated for freedom of conscience and expression, framing them as universal rights that should apply even in the Kingdom.

His posts did not call for violence or the overthrow of the state. They called for debate. That was enough to make him a target.

Arrest and Charges

Raif Badawi was arrested on 17 June 2012 in Jeddah. The charge was insulting Islam through electronic channels. Prosecutors initially added a charge of apostasy, which carries the death penalty under Saudi law. The trial opened in a criminal court that lacked jurisdiction over religious crimes, prolonging the proceedings and leaving Badawi in pre-trial detention for over a year.

In July 2013 he was sentenced to seven years in prison and six hundred lashes. That sentence was appealed and overturned. In May 2014, after a retrial before a different chamber, he was sentenced to ten years in prison, one thousand lashes to be administered in twenty weekly sessions of fifty each, a fine of one million Saudi riyals (approximately 240,000 euros), a ban on using the internet for ten years after release, and a ten-year travel ban. The harsher sentence followed intervention by prosecutors seeking a more severe punishment.

Public Flogging and International Response

On 9 January 2015, Raif Badawi was taken from Buraiman Prison in Jeddah to the plaza outside Al Juffali Mosque. After Friday prayers, in front of a crowd of worshippers and onlookers, he was flogged fifty times. Video and images of the flogging circulated internationally. Governments, UN bodies, and human rights organisations condemned the punishment as torture. Under sustained diplomatic pressure, Saudi authorities postponed further flogging sessions indefinitely, citing medical grounds. The remaining 950 lashes were never administered, but the sentence was never annulled.

Raif Badawi remained imprisoned in Buraiman

Prison throughout the remainder of his sentence. His wife and children, having fled to Canada in 2012, continued to campaign for his release. The case became emblematic of Saudi Arabia's criminalisation of peaceful expression and the use of judicial punishment as spectacle and deterrence.

Hunger Strike and Detention Conditions

On 17 September 2019, Badawi began an open-ended hunger strike. Prison authorities had confiscated his books and essential medication. The protest drew attention to deteriorating conditions and the absence of any prospect for early release. Four days later, on 21 September, he ended the strike after receiving a visit from the Saudi Human Rights Commission. It remains unclear what assurances, if any, were given. No public statement followed the visit, and his detention continued unchanged.

Release and Ongoing Restrictions

Raif Badawi was released on 11 March 2022 after serving his full ten-year sentence. He did not receive early release, pardon, or commutation. Amnesty International said his sentence had ended on 1 March 2022, ten days before he was freed. The ten-year travel ban imposed as part of his 2014 sentence remains in force. He is prohibited from leaving Saudi Arabia until March 2032. He remains separated from his wife and children, who hold asylum status in Canada. The travel ban functions as a continued punishment and a tool of family separation. Badawi cannot reunite with his children, and they cannot safely return to Saudi Arabia while he remains a convicted blasphemer under Saudi law.

Latest updates on this case Scan the code or visit: https://humena.org/defenders/raif-badawi/

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