

Advocacy dossier

Samar Badawi

سمر بدوى

At liberty **Saudi Arabia**

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The case at a glance

Samar Badawi challenged Saudi Arabia's male guardianship laws and led campaigns for women's right to drive. Arrested in July 2018, she was held at Dhahban Prison for three years, tortured during interrogation, and prosecuted for sharing information with foreign organisations.

Status **At liberty**	Arrested **30 Jul 2018**	Country **Saudi Arabia**

Sentence Five years in prison, two of them suspended, as reported by MENA Rights Group; released in June 2021 under a five-year travel ban and restrictions on speaking publicly. The date of the verdict has not been made public.

Charges Sharing information related to Saudi women's rights with foreign organisations and officials

What we ask

We call on the authorities to:

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

02 Restore valid travel documents and remove any border-watch flags placed in connection with peaceful human rights work.

03 Comply with the ICCPR Article 12 guarantee of freedom of movement.

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

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

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

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

Threats and intimidation 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

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How the case unfolded

16 September 2014

Travel ban imposed

Travel ban imposed

Saudi authorities placed Samar Badawi under a travel ban days after she participated in the 27th session of the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva.

3 December 2014

Context

Stopped from travelling to Brussels

On 3 December 2014 she was prevented from boarding a flight to Belgium for a human rights forum at King Abdulaziz International Airport and told that an indefinite travel ban had been issued against her.

12 January 2016

Arrest

Brief arrest

Security forces arrested Samar Badawi and questioned her about the Twitter account of her former husband, the jailed rights lawyer Waleed Abu al-Khair. She was released the next day.

13 January 2016

Release

Released after questioning

Samar Badawi was released the day after her arrest.

February 2017

Interrogation

Summoned for interrogation

Badawi was summoned for interrogation by the Bureau of Investigation in Jeddah, where she was questioned about her international advocacy and contacts with foreign human rights organisations.

30 July 2018

Arrest

Arrested in Jeddah

Saudi security forces arrested Samar Badawi at her home in Jeddah and transferred her to an undisclosed location, beginning a period of enforced disappearance.

27 June 2019

Hearing

First hearing

Her first court appearance took place before the Criminal Court, nearly a year after her arrest, on charges under the Anti-Cybercrime Law linked to her contacts with foreign organisations and officials about women's rights. The prosecution sought a five-year sentence.

20 February 2020

Hearing

Second hearing; observers barred

The second hearing took place at the Specialized Criminal Court. International observers, including diplomats and journalists, were denied permission to attend.

26 June 2021

Conditional release

Released on conditions after serving sentence

Samar Badawi was released from Dhahban Prison after serving a three-year sentence. ALQST announced her release on 27 June. Her release came with a five-year travel ban and restrictions on speaking publicly about her experience.

26 June 2021

Travel ban imposed

Five-year travel ban on release

As a condition of her release, Samar Badawi faces a five-year travel ban and restrictions on speaking publicly about her experience.

26 June 2021

Conviction

Sentence reported on her release

MENA Rights Group reported that she had been sentenced to five years in prison, two of them suspended, which allowed her conditional release in June 2021. The date of the verdict has not been made public.

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The full story

Update, 12 November 2026: this record was checked against current sources. Badawi has been out of prison since her conditional release in June 2021; the Gulf Centre for Human Rights still lists her as subject to a travel ban and to restrictions on her expression and employment, and no source found reports that the five-year ban attached to her release has been lifted. Her brother, the blogger Raif Badawi, remains under a ten-year travel ban, and she was arrested in the same 2018 crackdown on women's rights defenders that led to the detention of Loujain al-Hathloul.

Background and Work

Samar Badawi spent over a decade challenging the legal structures that subordinated women in Saudi Arabia. Her work centred on two pillars of the kingdom's gender-based control system: the ban on women driving and the male guardianship regime that required women to obtain permission from a male relative to work, travel, marry, or access healthcare.

When Saudi authorities refused to allow her to register as a candidate in the 2011 municipal elections, she filed a formal complaint with the Grievances Board against the Ministry of Municipal and Rural Affairs. The lawsuit was one of the first to frame women's political exclusion as a justiciable violation rather than a matter of tradition.

She joined the 2011 to 2012 women's driving campaign, a coordinated effort by Saudi women to defy the driving ban by taking to the roads and documenting their arrests. Badawi not only drove herself but assisted other women drivers with police procedures and court filings after they were detained. Her work earned international recognition: in 2012 the United States Department of State awarded her the International Woman of Courage Award.

Harassment and Travel Ban

Saudi authorities began targeting Badawi in 2014. On 16 September 2014, shortly after she participated in the 27th session of the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, the state imposed a travel ban preventing her from leaving the country. The ban was issued without formal charges and remained in place until her arrest in 2018.

In January 2016 security forces briefly arrested her. In February 2017 she was summoned for interrogation by the Bureau of Investigation in Jeddah. The interrogation focused on her international advocacy and her contacts with foreign human rights organisations. She was released but remained under surveillance.

Arrest and Enforced Disappearance

On 30 July 2018, Saudi security forces arrested Badawi at her home in Jeddah and transferred her to an undisclosed location. For months her family and legal representatives did not know where she was held. The arrest was part of a broader crackdown that began in May 2018 and targeted more than a dozen women's rights defenders, including Loujain al-Hathloul, Nassima al-Sada, and Nouf Abdulaziz.

The wave of arrests coincided with the Saudi government's announcement that it would partially

lift the ban on women driving in June 2018. The timing appeared designed to eliminate independent women's rights advocates before the policy change took effect, ensuring that the reform would be credited solely to the crown prince rather than to the women who had risked detention to demand it.

Torture and Interrogation

During her prolonged pre-trial detention, Badawi was subjected to torture and sexual harassment during interrogation. The methods used have not been publicly detailed, but accounts from other women detained in the same period describe beatings, electric shocks, waterboarding, and threats of rape. She was held at Dhahban Prison in Jeddah.

Trial and Sentencing

The first hearing in Badawi's case took place on 27 June 2019, nearly a year after her arrest. She was charged with sharing information related to Saudi women's rights with foreign organisations and officials. The prosecution argued that her engagement with international human rights bodies and foreign diplomats constituted a threat to state security. The maximum sentence for the charges was twenty years.

Her first hearing was held before the Criminal Court on charges under the Anti-Cybercrime Law; a later hearing took place at the Specialized Criminal Court, a tribunal established in 2008 to prosecute terrorism cases but routinely used against peaceful dissidents. The second hearing was held on 20 February 2020. International observers, including diplomats and journalists, were denied permission to attend.

MENA Rights Group reported that she was sentenced to five years in prison, two of them suspended. No public verdict document has been released.

Release

Samar Badawi was released on 26 June 2021 after nearly three years in detention. Her release came with a five-year travel ban and restrictions on speaking publicly about her experience. The Saudi authorities issued no public statement regarding her case. At the time of her release, many of the women arrested alongside her in 2018 remained imprisoned or under restrictive release conditions, including travel bans and prohibitions on speaking to the media.

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

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