

Advocacy dossier

Waleed Abu al-Khair

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Imprisoned (serving sentence) **Saudi Arabia**

Waleed Abu al-Khair is a Saudi lawyer and the founder of the Monitor of Human Rights in Saudi Arabia, who was arrested in April 2014 and sentenced by the Specialised Criminal Court to 15 years in prison followed by a 15-year travel ban. He remains detained in Dhahban Prison in Jeddah, where rights groups report solitary confinement, assaults and denial of medical care.

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The case at a glance

Waleed Abu al-Khair is a Saudi lawyer and the founder of the Monitor of Human Rights in Saudi Arabia, who was arrested in April 2014 and sentenced by the Specialised Criminal Court to 15 years in prison followed by a 15-year travel ban. He remains detained in Dhahban Prison in Jeddah, where rights groups report solitary confinement, assaults and denial of medical care.

Status	Arrested	Country
Imprisoned (serving sentence)	**15 Apr 2014**	**Saudi Arabia**

Sentence 15 years' imprisonment, five of them initially suspended, a 15-year travel ban after release, a fine of 200,000 Saudi riyals and closure of websites linked to him (6 July 2014; the appeal court ruled on 12 January 2015 that he must serve the full 15 years).

Charges
Contempt of court
Criticising the system of absolute monarchy and calling for a constitutional monarchy
Inciting public opinion
Communicating with foreign entities
Using the media to smear the country's reputation
Inciting international organisations against Saudi Arabia with the intent of ruining its reputation
Setting up and supervising an unlicensed association

What we ask

We call on the authorities to:

01 Release Waleed Abu al-Khair 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.

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How the case unfolded

6 October 2013

Referral to trial

Brought to trial before the Specialised Criminal Court

He appeared before the Specialised Criminal Court in Riyadh, a court set up for terrorism cases, on charges including taking part in establishing the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association (ACPRA). Human Rights Watch reported that the trial opened in October 2013.

29 October 2013

Conviction

Sentenced to three months over a 2011 reform statement

A criminal court in Jeddah sentenced him to three months in prison for offending the judiciary and attempting to distort the reputation of the kingdom, mainly for signing a 2011 statement criticising the treatment of 16 reformists. Amnesty International named him a prisoner of conscience.

6 February 2014

Appeal: judgment upheld

Mecca appeal court upholds three-month sentence

The Court of Appeal in Mecca upheld the three-month prison sentence imposed by the Jeddah court.

15 April 2014

Arrest

Arrested at a session of his trial at the Specialised Criminal Court

He was arrested while attending the fifth session of his trial in Riyadh, after refusing to sign a pledge to give up his human rights activism, under a detention order issued under the new Counter-Terrorism Law. He was taken to al-Ha'ir Prison and placed in solitary confinement; his family and lawyers were reportedly not informed for 24 hours.

6 July 2014

Conviction

Sentenced to 15 years in prison

The Specialised Criminal Court sentenced him to 15 years in prison, five of them suspended, a 15-year travel ban after release, a fine of 200,000 Saudi riyals and the closure of websites linked to him. He refused to recognise the court's legitimacy. Samar Badawi, then his wife, was in the courtroom.

12 January 2015

Appeal: sentence increased

Appeal court orders him to serve the full 15 years

The appeal court upheld the sentence and ruled that he must serve the full 15 years in prison, reinstating the suspended five years, because he refused to apologise.

September 2015

Other act

UN Working Group finds his detention arbitrary

At its September 2015 session the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention found the detention of Waleed Abu al-Khair and eight other defenders, among them Mohammed Fahd Al-Qahtani, Abdullah al-Hamid, Raif Badawi and Mohammed al-Bajadi, arbitrary and called for their immediate release and reparation.

2018

Other act

UN Working Group again finds his detention arbitrary

The UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention found his arrest, prosecution, conviction and sentence arbitrary for a second time and again called for his immediate release, reparation and an investigation.

26 November 2019

Punitive transfer

Moved to the high-security wing of Dhahban Prison

He was moved to high-security detention at Dhahban Prison, where he reported long exposure to the sun, denial of a mattress and of heating or air conditioning, and the seizure of his books.

29 November 2019

Hunger strike begins

Begins hunger strike over ill-treatment and transfer

He began a hunger strike in protest at his ill-treatment and transfer, ending it after nearly two weeks. On 11 December 2019, after being returned to high-security detention, he began a second hunger strike.

6 February 2020

Hunger strike ends

Ends second hunger strike after nearly two months

He announced the end of his hunger strike after nearly two months, following his transfer back to his previous accommodation.

February 2023

Hunger strike begins

Hunger strike after reported assault, followed by solitary confinement

According to reports cited by SANAD, a prison officer encouraged other inmates to assault him. He began a hunger strike, after which the authorities placed him in solitary confinement.

January 2024

Physical assault

Beaten by another inmate in Dhahban Prison

He was beaten by another inmate in Dhahban Prison. A joint statement by 17 organisations in April 2024 said he had been repeatedly beaten by another inmate in recent months.

12 March 2024

Medical care denied

Authorities refuse a needed hospital transfer

The Saudi authorities refused to transfer him to hospital for medical care that he needs. ALQST had recorded that in October 2022 he was prevented from taking medication and from visiting hospital.

15 April 2026

Detention conditions and health

Still detained twelve years after his arrest

On the twelfth anniversary of his arrest, SANAD reported that he remains detained and has faced solitary confinement, denial of visits, restricted contact with the outside world and denial of necessary medical care. A July 2025 joint statement by ALQST and others placed him in Dhahban Prison in Jeddah.

03
The full story

Update, 12 November 2026: Waleed Abu al-Khair remains imprisoned in Dhahban Prison in Jeddah, more than twelve years into a 15-year sentence that is to be followed by a 15-year travel ban. The most recent public report on his situation, from SANAD in April 2026, describes solitary confinement and denial of medical care.

Background and Work

Waleed Abu al-Khair, born in 1979 and based in Jeddah, is a Saudi lawyer who founded the Monitor of Human Rights in Saudi Arabia. The authorities refused to license the organisation, which was registered in Ontario, Canada, and the Justice Ministry refused to license him as a lawyer. He represented many victims of abuses, including the blogger Raif Badawi and the women's rights defender Samar Badawi, who was then his wife, as well as members of the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association (ACPRA). He also hosted a weekly discussion group for reformists in his home.

His work has been recognised with the Olof Palme Prize in 2012, the Ludovic Trarieux International Human Rights Prize in 2015, the Law Society of Upper Canada Human Rights Award in 2016, the Right Livelihood Award in 2018, shared with Mohammed Fahd Al-Qahtani and Abdullah al-Hamid, the PEN Pinter Prize for an International Writer of Courage in 2018, the American Bar Association International Human Rights Award in 2019, the Geuzenpenning of Amnesty Netherlands in 2020, shared with Mohammed Fahd Al-Qahtani, Abdullah al-Hamid and Mohammed al-Bejadi, and the Anna Dahlbäck Memorial Fund award in 2024.

The Arrest

In October 2013 a criminal court in Jeddah sentenced him to three months in prison for offending the judiciary, mainly for signing a 2011 statement criticising the treatment of 16 reformists; the Court of Appeal in Mecca upheld the ruling on 6 February 2014. In the same month, October 2013, a separate trial opened before the Specialised Criminal Court in Riyadh, a court created for terrorism cases. On 15 April 2014, at the fifth session of that trial, he was arrested after refusing to sign a pledge to give up his activism, under a detention order issued by the Minister of Interior under the new Counter-Terrorism Law. He was taken to al-Ha'ir Prison and placed in solitary confinement, and according to a 2025 joint statement his family and lawyers were not told of his arrest for 24 hours and he was held incommunicado for two to three months.

Detention Conditions and Health

He has been moved at least five times, from al-Ha'ir Prison in Riyadh to Briman Prison and then Dhahban Prison in Jeddah. In 2016 he went on hunger strike to demand adequate food, medical check-ups and reading material. On 26 November 2019 he was moved to a high-security wing of Dhahban, where he reported long exposure to the sun and the removal of his mattress and books; he went on hunger strike on 29 November and again from 11 December 2019 until 6 February 2020. ALQST reports that in October 2022 he was prevented from taking his medication, that in January 2024 he was beaten by another inmate, and that on 12 March 2024 he was refused a hospital transfer he needed. SANAD

reports that in February 2023 a prison officer encouraged other inmates to attack him, after which he went on hunger strike and was put in solitary confinement. Rights groups also report sleep deprivation, restricted visits and denial of adequate food.

Legal Proceedings

On 6 July 2014 the Specialised Criminal Court sentenced him to 15 years in prison, five of them suspended, a 15-year travel ban after release, a fine of 200,000 Saudi riyals and the closure of his websites. The charges included seeking to undermine the state and its officials, inciting public opinion, insulting the judiciary, inciting international organisations against the kingdom, founding an unlicensed organisation and violating the anti-cybercrime law. He refused to recognise the court and did not respond to the charges. On 12 January 2015 the appeal court ruled that he must serve the full 15 years because he refused to apologise; FIDH dates the appeal ruling to 15 February 2015. Counted from April 2014, the prison term would end in 2029.

International Response

The UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention found his detention arbitrary at its September 2015 session, in an opinion that also covered Mohammed Fahd Al-Qahtani, Abdullah al-Hamid, Raif Badawi and Mohammed al-Bejadi, and again in 2018, each time calling for his immediate release and reparation. On 15 April 2024, the tenth anniversary of his arrest, 17 organisations including Human Rights Watch, ALQST, MENA Rights Group, GCHR, FIDH and OMCT called for his release. ALQST, Right Livelihood and three lawyers' and academic bodies renewed the call on 6 July 2025, and SANAD marked twelve years of his detention on 15 April 2026. Amnesty International has considered him a prisoner of conscience since 2013.

Latest updates on this case Scan the code or visit: https://humena.org/defenders/waleed-abu-al-khair/

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