



The Rt Hon David Lammy MP
Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs
By email

9 May 2025

Human rights abuses of women in Saudi Arabia

Dear Foreign Secretary,

We are writing to express our deep concern about the cases of Saudi sisters and women's rights activists Manahel and Maryam al-Otaibi, who remain imprisoned and under travel ban in the kingdom respectively. A third sister, Fouz, who is seeking asylum in the UK, remains at risk should she return home.

Manahel, a 30-year-old Saudi fitness instructor, was arrested in November 2022 and sentenced by Saudi Arabia's counter-terror court to 11 years in prison in January 2024, which was upheld in November. The charges against her related solely to her choice of clothing and expression of views online, including tweets in support of women's rights and posting videos without an *abaya* (a long, loose robe). Her sister Fouz, named in the BBC's list of 100 inspiring and influential women, faces similar charges, but fled Saudi Arabia fearing arrest after being summoned for questioning in 2022.

In prison, Manahel has been subjected to a catalogue of human rights violations, including solitary confinement, denial of health care, and various forms of physical and psychological abuse from guards and fellow inmates, including stabbings and beatings. Since her last phone call to her family in December, she has been forcibly disappeared, raising fears for her safety.

Their elder sister, Maryam, imprisoned in 2017 for over 100 days, remains trapped in the country under an unofficial travel ban imposed as a result of her activism. She has tried to have the ban lifted by contacting several official bodies including the official Saudi Human Rights Commission (SHRC), but so far without success.

Their cases are emblematic, standing in contrast to the authorities' narrative of women's empowerment. Ironically, the sisters exercised freedoms that they believed were ensured by reforms announced by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, including to wear what they liked. Yet they were targeted for doing so.

Despite some notable reforms in recent years, such as allowing women for the first time to apply for their own passports, and ending the ban on women driving, women in Saudi Arabia still lack many fundamental rights. The male guardianship system that treats adult women as minors has not yet been dismantled. The long-awaited 2022 Personal Status Law, which was supposed to be a major reform, in fact serves to codify rather than abolish many



restrictive elements of the system. Women are also still subject to laws requiring their obedience to a male guardian – who may be their father, husband, brother or son – and ‘disobedience’ remains a crime.

The authorities meanwhile continue to target and punish those expressing support for women’s rights. Amid an intensified crackdown on free speech in recent years, the Saudi courts have convicted and passed long jail sentences on several women over peaceful rights activity on social media, including Manal al-Gafiri (18 years), Fatima al-Shawarb (30 years), Sukaynah al-Aithan (40 years), and Nourah al-Qahtani (45 years).

Positively, several prisoners of conscience have been released in Saudi Arabia recently following sustained efforts, including University of Leeds PhD student Salma al-Shahab after over four years in prison on the basis of her peaceful online activism. Yet when prisoners of conscience are released, they routinely continue to face heavy restrictions, notably travel bans that prevent them from leaving the country. Examples include prominent women human rights defenders Nassima al-Sadah, Samar Badawi and Loujain al-Hathloul.

As a close ally of Saudi Arabia, the UK has considerable diplomatic leverage with which to press the Saudi authorities over such human rights violations in the country, and to raise individual cases like the al-Otaibi sisters. The FCDO has said it is monitoring the cases, and that Saudi Arabia remains a FCDO human rights priority country. But further steps are needed. We urge you to use the full range of diplomatic tools at your disposal to help secure Manahel's release and the lifting of Maryam's travel ban, and of other women detained and facing such restrictions for exercising their basic freedoms.

Yours sincerely,

Ellie Chowns MP
Andy Slaughter MP
Baroness Lister of Burtersett
Brian Leishman MP
Catherine Fookes MP
Christine Jardine MP
Baroness Bennett of Manor Castle
Neil Duncan-Jordan MP
Sammy Wilson MP
The Rt Hon. the Baroness D'Souza CMG