

Assault on Freedom of Movement:

The Use of Arbitrary Travel Bans in Saudi Arabia



Although Saudi Arabia's leaders seek to project a modern, progressive image to the world, the lived reality for many of its citizens and residents is very different. One of the clearest examples of this relates to a basic human right: freedom of movement.

In recent years the authorities have started opening up the country to foreign investment and tourism, easing visa restrictions and hosting major sporting and cultural events. Yet at the same time they are cruelly and arbitrarily barring increasing numbers of Saudi citizens from leaving the country through the use of unlawful travel bans, part of a broader pattern of reprisals and suppression of all dissent.

In recent years, and particularly throughout the initial months of 2025, dozens of prisoners of conscience have been released following sustained advocacy efforts. This is not the end of their troubles, however – release from prison often comes with a further, hidden form of repression, as many of them continue to be barred from travelling abroad for many years, in violation of basic international human rights standards. The travel bans imposed on them frequently extend to family members as well, amounting to a form of collective punishment. As well as having a severe personal impact on the victims, all of these measures combine to deepen the prevailing climate of fear and intimidation in the country.

Legal background

These arbitrary travel bans contravene international human rights law. Article 13 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that “[e]veryone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country”. The Arab Charter on Human Rights, which Saudi Arabia has ratified, states even more explicitly that “citizens shall not be arbitrarily or illegally deprived from leaving any Arab country, including their own”.

They are also in contravention of Saudi domestic law. The Saudi Travel Document Law states that “[n]o person may be barred from travelling except by a judicial ruling or a decision issued by the Minister of Interior or the President of

State Security, for specific reasons related to security and for a specific period of time... the person barred from travelling shall be notified within a period not exceeding one week from the date of issuance of said ruling or decision.”

In addition to travel bans imposed by judicial ruling (i.e. court-ordered) or by order of the Minister of Interior or President of State Security, increasingly they are being applied unofficially, without any formal notification or justification as mandated by the Saudi Travel Document Law. Sometimes victims only become aware of them when they find themselves barred at the airport or a border crossing from leaving the country.

Court-imposed travel bans

Travel bans in Saudi Arabia are usually imposed in advance, to be applied after release from prison, as part of a judicial sentence and normally for the same duration as the prison term itself. When applied against people who have been arbitrarily detained for peacefully exercising their basic rights and/or as a result of unfair, discriminatory or disproportionate proceedings, such travel bans are considered, by extension, to have been arbitrarily imposed.

The majority of [prisoners of conscience](#) currently in Saudi prisons thus face the prospect of long travel bans after completion of their time in prison. Examples include humanitarian aid worker [Abdulrahman al-Sadhan](#), serving a 20-year prison sentence to be followed by a 20-year travel ban for satirical posts he published peacefully on X (formerly Twitter), and human rights defender [Waleed Abu al-Khair](#), serving a 15-year prison sentence to be followed by a 15-year travel ban as a result of his peaceful human rights activism.

This is a non-exhaustive list of Saudi prisoners of conscience who were released after completion of their prison terms yet who remain under travel bans imposed by the courts at the time of sentencing:

Name	Field of activity	Duration of travel ban
Essam Koshak	Human rights activist and computer engineer	4 years (now expired)
Nassima al-Sadah	Woman human rights defender	5 years
Samar Badawi	Woman human rights defender	5 years
Essa al-Nukheifi	Human rights activist	6 years
Naima al-Matrood	Woman protester	6 years
Nadhir al-Majed	Writer	7 years
Salma al-Shehab	Doctoral student	8 years
Alaa Brinji	Journalist	8 years
Murtaja Qureiris	Child protester	8 years
Abdulrahman al-Hamid	Academic and human rights defender	9 years
Dawoud al-Marhoun	Child protester	10 years
Ali al-Nimr	Child protester	10 years
Abdullah al-Zaher	Child protester	10 years

Raif Badawi	Blogger	10 years
Fahad al-Fahad	Human rights defender	10 years
Abdulkarim al-Khodr	Human rights defender	10 years
Fawzan al-Harbi	Human rights defender	10 years
Mohammed al-Qahtani	Human rights defender and academic	10 years
Fadhel al-Manasef	Writer and human rights defender	14 years
Abdul Rahman al-Shumayri	Academic	15 years

“Unofficial” travel bans

As mentioned above, in addition to these court-ordered travel bans the Saudi authorities also impose “unofficial” travel bans without notification of any relevant ministerial order, security justification or specific duration.

Two high-profile victims of this practice are women’s rights activists [Loujain al-Hathloul](#) and [Maryam al-Otaibi](#). Al-Hathloul’s criminal sentence included a travel ban, to follow her release, of two years and 10 months, which was due to expire on 12 November 2023. Since then she has remained unable to travel, despite having received no formal notification from the Saudi authorities of any new or ongoing ban, either judicial or administrative. Based on this precedent, it is feared that others may face the same fate once their court-imposed travel bans expire or if their sentences are quashed. Indeed, since early 2025, a

number of prisoners of conscience have been released partway through their prison terms, yet on terms that remain largely unknown, amid a total absence of transparency around detention and judicial processes in the country. While some sentences may have been quashed, the individuals likely remain subject to unofficial travel bans.

In a [letter](#) to the Saudi authorities in March 2024, a group of United Nations experts formally enquired about the legal grounds on which they had banned al-Hathloul and al-Otaibi from travelling abroad, and expressed concern about this administrative harassment. The Saudi authorities' [response](#), rejecting the UN experts' concerns, was [totally unsatisfactory](#), making contradictory and misleading assertions.

Furthermore, since unofficial travel bans like these lack any stated legal basis, there is no way to formally appeal against them or apply to have them lifted. When al-Hathloul filed a judicial complaint against the Presidency of State Security, challenging her travel ban and calling for it to be lifted, she was met with repeated bureaucratic stalling. Eventually her complaint came before the *Diwan al-Mazalem* (Board of Grievances, an administrative court), but that body failed to address her case and the judge declared himself incompetent to hear it. Similarly, al-Otaibi has tried to have the travel ban on her lifted by contacting several official bodies including the Ministry of Interior, the Presidency of State Security and the official Saudi Human Rights Commission (SHRC), but so far without success.

The Saudi authorities have also been making increasing use of arbitrary travel bans on family members of targeted individuals, in what appears to be a form of collective punishment. This has been the fate of all the al-Hathloul family remaining in Saudi Arabia, and the entire family in Saudi Arabia, totalling 19 individuals, of reformist cleric [Salman al-Odah](#). Meanwhile, family members living outside the country, including Loujain's sister Lina al-Hathloul and Salman's son Abdullah al-Odah, are unable to return for fear of prosecution. [Appeals](#) to the SHRC from Saudi nationals living abroad to help lift arbitrary travel bans on their relatives inside the kingdom have repeatedly fallen on deaf ears.

The human impact on victims and their families

These [arbitrary travel bans](#), of whatever kind, have serious consequences for the victims' lives, preventing them from visiting family members outside the country, pursuing personal and professional ambitions abroad, or accessing specialist healthcare. This in turn can have a profound impact on the mental and emotional well-being of both the individuals directly affected and their families. Moreover, it impinges on the basic right to travel freely, limiting individuals' abilities to live fully empowered lives. They are also sometimes accompanied by bans on work and social media activity.

Separating families and loved ones

In the majority of cases, travel bans cruelly separate family members and loved ones from one another. Human rights defender and academic [Mohammed al-Qahtani](#), released on 7 January 2025 more than two years after completing a 10-year prison term for his peaceful activism, remains under a 10-year travel ban. This keeps him, at the age of 60, separated from his wife and five children living in the United States.

Similarly, blogger [Raif Badawi](#), released on 11 March 2022 after completing a 10-year prison term for his writings, remains under a travel ban of the same length, keeping him separated from his wife and three children in Canada. Meanwhile, [Saad Ibrahim al-Madhi](#), a 75-year-old dual US-Saudi citizen and retired engineer, was released from prison on 20 March 2023 part-way through a 19-year sentence imposed for peaceful tweets. However, he remains under a travel ban and is unable to go back home to the United States and be reunited with family there. Despite the charges against him having been dropped in court, the Ministry of Interior has informed him that he is still subject to a 19-year travel ban.

Blocking personal and professional goals abroad

Travel bans also prevent individuals from pursuing personal and professional

goals abroad, including studying. Doctoral student [Salma al-Shehab](#) was released on 10 February 2025 after more than four years of arbitrary imprisonment for her peaceful online activism in support of Saudi women's rights. She apparently now faces an eight-year travel ban, which means that she is unable to complete her PhD studies in the United Kingdom, where she was studying prior to her arrest during a holiday visit to her family in Saudi Arabia in January 2021.

Overseas travel was also vital to prisoners of conscience who previously led active professional lives abroad or courageously carried out human rights advocacy in international forums despite the risk of reprisals. Examples include women's rights activist [Loujain al-Hathloul](#), who in March 2018, shortly before her arrest, attended a session in Geneva of the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Another women's rights activist, [Samar Badawi](#), travelled to Washington DC in 2012 to receive the US State Department's International Women of Courage Award, and to Geneva in 2014 to address the UN Human Rights Council. The travel bans imposed on these women since their release from prison cruelly hamper their ability to continue their vital work.

Preventing access to specialist healthcare

Specialist healthcare is often a priority for prisoners of conscience following their release, and it may be necessary for them to seek treatment abroad. In addition to years of arbitrary imprisonment they have sometimes suffered further gross violations of their rights within the Saudi [prison system](#), including physical ill-treatment, denial of essential medication and other forms of deliberate medical neglect, exacerbating existing health conditions and creating new ones.

Relentless suppression of basic rights

It must be pointed out that these restrictions are part of a broader pattern of repression targeting peaceful activists, dissidents, and anyone expressing

even mildly critical views. In Saudi Arabia there is no independent civil society left, and free speech, freedom of peaceful assembly, and political participation are non-existent. The country has no formal constitution, only a Basic Law of Governance that fails to substantiate fundamental rights and freedoms.

Since Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's rise to power in 2017, authority has become ever more centralised and the authorities have unleashed unprecedented repression, brutally cracking down on free speech and any whisper of dissent. Hundreds of human rights defenders, religious figures, academics, writers, and anyone expressing even mild criticism or not toeing the official line have routinely been arbitrarily arrested, tried and sentenced under the kingdom's draconian counter-terrorism and anti-cybercrime laws. In recent years, courts have issued extraordinarily long prison terms and even death sentences for people peacefully exercising their basic rights, especially the right to free expression online. Many continue to languish in jail as prisoners of conscience.

Recommendations

ALQST strongly calls on the Saudi authorities, and urges others to call on them as well, to:

- ensure that the rights to freedom of expression, assembly and association are fully respected in law and practice in Saudi Arabia, and immediately and unconditionally release all prisoners of conscience who are being detained for exercising their fundamental freedoms;
- immediately lift all travel bans – judicial, administrative or unofficial – imposed on individuals for exercising their rights to freedom of expression, assembly or association; and
- immediately lift unofficial travel bans imposed on family members of targeted individuals, and respect their right to freedom of movement.



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