

Mohamed al-Oteibi and Abdullah al-Atawi appear before the Specialised Criminal Court

On October 20, 2016, activists Mohamed bin Abdullah al-Oteibi and Abdullah bin Modhi al-Atawi were informed of a case against them in the Specialised Criminal Court (SCC), which handles terrorism cases, and were given the date for the first session of the trial. Ten days later the first session of their trial was held in the SCC, and charges were brought against the activists relating to their peaceful activism and freedom of expression. The main charge against them was founding a human rights organisation, Al-Ittehad Human Rights Association. They were accused of publishing statements about human rights, which the prosecutor saw as trespassing on the territory of the government Human Rights Commission and the National Society for Human Rights NGO. The public prosecutor saw publishing human rights reports, communicating with the media and other organisations, visiting activist Dr Abdullah al-Hamed in prison and retweeting some messages on Twitter as crimes worthy of punishment. The initial hearing ended with December 26, 2016 being set as the date for the next session.

ALQST insists that all the charges brought against the two activists, al-Oteibi and al-Atawi, are unlawful and outrageous, and violate their basic rights. The Saudi authorities wanted to reopen a case that had previously ended for the purpose of punishing the activists and frightening others like them, or as the public prosecutor put it “to make them an example for others”.

Founding a human rights organisation, and publishing and tweeting about human rights, or demanding political reform, are not crimes that deserve punishment but legitimate practices that the Saudi authorities should guarantee. Likewise, reopening the case of the founding of al-Ittehad Association is about targeting activists, even with cases that are already over. It was more than three years ago, in May 2013, that the founders of al-Ittehad Association received a letter from the Ministry of Social Affairs in response to their application to found a human rights association, which the ministry refused to license. It then secured undertakings from the founders to dissolve the association and discontinue its activities, thereby closing the case of the founding of al-Ittehad Human Rights Association for the time being.

ALQST calls for the charges against the activists to be dropped, for an end to their harassment and persecution, and for the lifting of the travel ban imposed on them. ALQST is clear that the Specialised Criminal Court is not an independent judicial body, and calls for it to be abolished, for the rule of law and independence of the judiciary to be strengthened, and for a complete end to the criminalisation of free expression and violations of human rights.

