

URGENT ACTION

SAUDI "DAY OF RAGE" PROTESTER RELEASED

Khaled al-Johani, the only man to reach the site of the demonstration to protest on the "Day of Rage" in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, on 11 March 2011, was released on 8 August.



Khaled al-Johani © Private

Khaled al-Johani, a 40-year-old teacher, was arrested in the capital, Riyadh, on 11 March 2011 and taken into detention, minutes after an interview with BBC Arabic during which he spoke about the lack of freedoms in Saudi Arabia. He was apparently the sole protester who reached the location of the planned demonstration due to the heavy security presence on the day.

He is believed to have been held at first in Ulaysha prison in Riyadh and kept in solitary confinement there for two months. He was then transferred to al-Ha'ir prison in Riyadh, where he was allowed visits from his family. He is said to have refused an offer of a state-appointed lawyer, asking instead for a lawyer of his own choosing, which he was initially denied. He was apparently put into solitary confinement again in February 2012, after arguing with fellow inmates. On one occasion, he was confined outdoors on a cold day without food or warm clothing. It is reported that he was also verbally abused and threatened by prison guards, and that his mental health deteriorated.

After nearly a year in detention, his trial began on 22 February 2012 when he was brought before the Specialized Criminal Court in Riyadh, which was set up in 2008 to try people detained on terrorism-related charges. The General Prosecutor read out the charges, which according to local sources included "supporting demonstrations", "being present at the location of a demonstration" and "communication with foreign media in a manner that harmed the reputation of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia". The court adjourned and allowed him to appoint a lawyer of his choice for the first time, over 11 months after his arrest.

Khaled al-Johani was allowed to leave prison on 25 July for a family visit of 48 hours. He was subsequently returned to the same prison on the evening of 27 July.

Amnesty International received information only recently that Khaled al-Johani was released from prison on 8 August 2012. It appears that he is no longer facing trial on the charges brought against him, but his exact legal status is not known to Amnesty International.

No further action is requested from the UA network. Many thanks to all who sent appeals.

This is the first update of UA 59/12. Further information: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/MDE23/004/2012/en>

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ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Against the background of the mass demonstrations and uprisings across North Africa and the Middle East during 2011, some Saudi Arabians have felt emboldened to defy the permanent ban on protests in their country. The royal family initially responded by handing out benefits to citizens worth billions of dollars, including the creation of 300 jobs in the Ministry of Interior's Bureau of Investigation and Public Prosecution. But then the authorities toughened their stance.

In early 2011 an unknown group of Saudi Arabian activists had created a page on Facebook called "the people want to overthrow the regime". The group called for an elected Shura Council (the present one is a consultative body appointed by the King), a fully independent judiciary, the release of all political prisoners, the exercise of freedom of expression and assembly, the abolition of all duties and taxes, and a minimum wage. In Riyadh after Friday prayer on 4 March 2011, a rally was held aimed at building momentum for what was planned to be the major demonstration, the "Day of Rage", on 11 March. A 25-year-old teacher, Muhammad al-Wad'ani, was arrested that day and is still held.

Protests by the minority Shi'a Muslim community also started in February 2011, in the Eastern Province. In response to this and amid reports that further protests calling for reform by others in Saudi Arabia were planned, the Ministry of Interior issued a statement on 5 March 2011 confirming the long-standing ban on demonstrations. According to the statement, security forces would take "all necessary measures" against those who attempt to disrupt order.

The ban was backed the following day by the Council of Senior Ulema (Saudi Arabia's highest religious authority), the religious police and the Shura Council (a body that advises the monarchy). The country's religious leaders, the Shura Council and religious police instructed people not to join the "Day of Rage", and some media reports suggested that some 10,000 soldiers were to be deployed to stop the protests.

The threats by the authorities seemed to work. Khaled al-Johani, the only protester to reach the designated location of the demonstration, was arrested on 11 March, minutes after speaking to international journalists. That day, and in the days leading up to the intended "Day of Rage", the security forces reportedly arrested dozens of people they suspected of being involved in organizing the planned protests in Riyadh or of trying to participate in the "Day of Rage" demonstration. Most of those arrested were apparently released soon afterwards. Amnesty International has information about a further four people arrested at this time who are still held, but does not know whether any others are still detained see the report issued on 9 March 2012, *Saudi Arabia's Day of Rage: One year on*, (<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/MDE23/007/2012/en>)

Sporadic protests have continued, spurred in some cases by grievances about the prolonged detention without charge of relatives or about discrimination against the Shi'a minority, particularly in the east of the country, and in others by a desire for political reform. In most cases, they have been dispersed quickly and those arrested have often been pressured into pledging not to come out onto the streets again, before being released or held incommunicado for prolonged periods. In some cases they are alleged to have been tortured or otherwise ill-treated. The repression of protesters comes against a backdrop of continuing repression of human rights activists, political dissidents and critics of the authorities, a number of whom have been detained and, in some cases, tried and imprisoned. While they are often accused, and convicted, of security-related offences, in courts set up to deal with security and terrorism-related offences, the acts which they are alleged to have committed generally appear to involve merely the peaceful exercise of their rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly. For more information see the report *Saudi Arabia: Repression in the name of security* issued on 1 December 2011 at <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/MDE23/016/2011/en>

Name: Khaled al-Johani

Gender m/f: M

Further information on UA: 59/12 Index: MDE 23/019/2012 Issue Date: 5 September 2012