

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

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OMAN: LIFE SENTENCE FOR PRISONER OF CONSCIENCE

Between August and November 2018, Oman [sentenced](#) six individuals to life in prison on vague grounds of national security. Amnesty International has called for the Omani authorities to try the defendants in proceedings that meet international standards of fairness or to release them. Recently the organization obtained more details about the trial and its background which establish that the defendant Mohammed Abdullah al-Shahi, one of the six individuals, has been imprisoned solely for peacefully exercising his right to freedom of expression and association. He is therefore a prisoner of conscience, and Amnesty International now calls for his immediate and unconditional release.

A climate of fear to speak out surrounded the case from start to finish, among both prisoners' families and defense attorneys. When Amnesty International requested clarification of the charges from Oman's Human Rights Commission, the response stated only that the "charges [are] related to national security." Amnesty International was only able to verify many details about the case months after the verdict was handed down.

The charges against Mohammed Abdullah al-Shahi include providing ideas for, writing, and transmitting articles – mostly for a now defunct website, [khalejeat.net](#) – which condemned the Omani government's policies in Musandam. Other accusations included contributing 100 Omani riyals (≈ \$250 U.S. today) to a fund for promotion of regional autonomy, and unsuccessfully requesting financial backing for his cause from the Saudi embassy in Dubai, in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Other defendants were likewise charged with involvement in [khalejeat.net](#) content, with starting a group called the National Committee for the Defense of Ru'us al-Jibal (the local name for Musandam), and in general with peaceful activism and campaigns for the rights of Musandam's residents.

According to Amnesty International's information, the group as a whole engaged only in non-violent activism; however, Amnesty International has only been able to review the full list of charges against Mohammed Abdullah al-Shahi. All of the six prisoners are from the Shuhuh tribe; four are Omani and two are Emirati by nationality. (In addition, several other Shuhuh individuals of Emirati nationality were named as suspects or accused in the court proceedings but remain outside of Omani custody). The prosecution portrayed them as plotters of a secessionist conspiracy based on the circulation of articles on Musandam between them on WhatsApp.

Mohammed al-Shahi and the other defendants' convictions were based on Article 125 of the Penal Code, which imposes life in prison or a death sentence on "anyone intentionally committing an act which leads to the infringement of the country's independence or unity or the sanctity of its territory," and Article 19 of the Law on Combating Information Technology Crimes, which criminalizes Internet material "infringing on religious values or public order."

Mohammed al-Shahi was motivated to speak and write about Musandam's situation by human rights violations including home demolitions, and poor socioeconomic conditions in the province. There have been waves of arbitrary detentions of Musandam residents championing the region's local history and culture since 2015, and reliable reports of arbitrary detention of Shuhuh tribe members in Musandam dating back at least to 1991. In addition, the government has repeatedly undertaken demolitions of homes on the pretext that they are in violation of building codes. Authorities have often expropriated lands for state use after demolishing the homes built on them. Since September 2014, the "immediate removal team" of the Ministry of Regional Municipalities & Water Resources has announced the imminent or completed demolition of dwellings and other local structures in Musandam's Daba, Khasab, and Bukha municipalities on at least 15 occasions.

Affronted by the central government's treatment of Musandam, al-Shahi became active in 2016 in meetings and online writing about the province and local grievances against the central government, while he was living and working in Dubai, UAE. The judgment states that in 2013 or 2014 al-Shahi met with a French lawyer to learn more about Musandam's legal options under international law, and that during a trip to London in 2016 he attempted to contact Amnesty International. On 5 May 2018, Emirati security officials detained him at his home in Dubai and turned him over to the Omani government. He has remained in detention or prison since that time. The other five defendants were detained in Oman (in one case, at the border) during spring and summer 2018.

The court proceedings against al-Shahi were summary and were marred by multiple violations of the right to fair trial. At the first hearing, the court questioned him without his attorney present, and without informing him that he had the right to an attorney until after it had compelled him to answer multiple questions about his pro-Musandam activism. Only one

additional hearing – the only one with defense attorneys present – was held before the court reached its decision. The evidence cited against al-Shahi in court consisted exclusively of his “confessions” before the Internal Security Agency and the Office of Public Prosecution. Other prisoners have reported that all the defendants in the case were physically abused to extract such “confessions.” The methods used included beating, stress positions (forced standing for three days, forced sitting in the same posture for six days), and sensory assault (prolonged exposure to extremely loud noises along with blinding light or total darkness). Several of the defendants were reported to be barely able to walk afterwards. The defense informed the court that Mohammed’s “confession” was a product of “mental coercion,” but the court ignored this allegation, accepting the Internal Security Agency’s account with no investigation of the claims of torture.

Amnesty International calls on Oman to immediately and unconditionally release Mohammed Abdullah al-Shahi, and all other defendants convicted solely for peacefully exercising their right to freedom of expression. Oman’s allies in the international community should monitor the situation in Oman and speak out against arbitrary detentions there, in addition to calling for the release of Mohammed Abdullah al-Shahi and other prisoners of conscience.