

URGENT ACTION

MANAHEL AL-OTAIBI SENTENCED TO 11 YEARS IN PRISON

On 9 January 2024 Saudi Arabia's infamous Specialized Criminal Court sentenced Manahel al-Otaibi, a 29-year-old fitness instructor and women's rights activist, to 11 years in prison for "terrorist offences" in a secret trial. She was arrested on 16 November 2022 and charged with violating the Anti-Cyber Crime Law due to her tweets in support of women's rights as well as posting photos of herself at the mall without an abaya (a traditional loose-fitting long-sleeved robe) on Snapchat. Saudi authorities forcibly disappeared Manahel al-Otaibi between 5 November 2023 and 14 April 2024. On 14 April 2024 she contacted her family and told them she was being held in solitary confinement in al-Malaz Prison with a broken leg after being brutally beaten in detention, and without access to medical care.

TAKE ACTION: WRITE AN APPEAL IN YOUR OWN WORDS OR USE THIS MODEL LETTER

Waleed Mohammed Al Smani
Minister of Justice
Riyadh, Saudi Arabia
Postal Code 11472, P.O.Box 7775
Email: minister-office@moj.gov.sa
Your Excellency,

I am distressed to learn that the Specialized Criminal Court in Saudi Arabia has sentenced 29-year-old fitness instructor and women's rights activist Manahel al-Otaibi to eleven years in prison on "terrorist offences" after a secret trial. The decision was only revealed weeks later in the Saudi government's formal reply to a request for information in a Joint Communication by UN Special Rapporteurs about her case.

On 9 January 2024, the Specialized Criminal Court found Manahel al-Otaibi guilty under articles 43 and 44 of the Kingdom's Law for Combatting Terrorism and its Financing. Manahel al-Otaibi's family have not had access to her court documents, or the evidence presented against her.

Manahel al-Otaibi was arrested on 16 November 2022 and charged with violating the Anti-Cyber Crime Law for tweeting hashtags in support of women's rights and posting photos on Snapchat of herself at the mall wearing "immodest" clothing. Her case was first heard by the Criminal Court in Riyadh on 23 January 2023 who referred her to the Specialized Criminal Court. According to court documents reviewed by Amnesty International, Manahel al-Otaibi was charged with "publishing and spreading content that contains committing public sins and inciting individuals and girls in society to renounce religious principles and social values and to violate public order and public morals on her Twitter account", in violation of the Anti-Cybercrime Law. The charges against her are based on her social media posts which were "opposed to regulations and laws that relate to women", including through calling to #EndMaleGuardianship.

Saudi authorities forcibly disappeared Manahel al-Otaibi between 5 November 2023 and 14 April 2024. On 14 April 2024, after a period more than five months of enforced disappearance, she called her family to inform them that she is being held in solitary confinement in al-Malaz Prison with a broken leg after being brutally beaten, and without access to medical care.

Her sister Fawzia al-Otaibi told Amnesty International that she believes the only reason Manahel al-Otaibi was finally permitted a phone call was in order to convey a message to her family to stop being publicly outspoken about her imprisonment. Her family alleged that Manahel al-Otaibi spent "months" in solitary confinement, based on information provided to them by former detainees who had been held in the same prison. Prolonged solitary confinement for more than 15 days is a violation of the absolute prohibition of torture and other cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment.

I urge you to order the immediate and unconditional release of Manahel al-Otaibi, as she has been convicted solely for peacefully exercising her right to freedom of expression. Pending her release, she must be granted immediate access to medical care, and her allegations of torture and other ill-treatment must be impartially investigated.

Yours sincerely,

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Manahel al-Otaibi's case was first heard by the Criminal Court in Riyadh. On 23 January 2023, the Criminal Court ruled that it had no jurisdiction to try this case, and referred the case to the Specialized Criminal Court (SCC) in the capital, Riyadh. The SCC has routinely used vague provisions under the anti-cybercrime and counter-terror laws equating peaceful expression with "terrorism". Amnesty International has documented how [every stage of the SCC judicial process](#) is tainted by human rights violations. Since 2018, Saudi authorities have arbitrarily detained Saudi women's rights activists who campaigned for the end of the male guardianship system and the right to drive in Saudi Arabia. Women's rights activists **reported** facing sexual harassment, torture and other forms of ill-treatment during interrogation. Those released are under travel bans and face restrictions on their freedom of expression.

Both of Manahel al-Otaibi's sisters have also faced charges related to their campaigning for women's rights. In the same case against Manahel al-Otaibi submitted by the public prosecution to the Riyadh Criminal Court, the Public Prosecutor accused her sister Fawzia of leading "a propaganda campaign to incite Saudi girls to denounce religious principles and rebel against customs and traditions in the Saudi culture" and using a hashtag "which promotes liberation and the fall of male guardianship". The court document, reviewed by Amnesty International, states that a separate order would be issued for Fawzia's arrest. Their other sister Mariam, a prominent campaigner against male guardianship in the Kingdom, has previously been charged and detained for her women's rights activism, and is currently under travel ban.

In a similar case to Manahel al-Otaibi's, on 25 January 2023, the Specialized Criminal Court (SCC) resentedenced Salma al-Shehab, a Leeds University PhD student and mother of two, to 27 years in prison, followed by a 27-year travel ban upon appeal. The SCC convicted Salma al-Shehab of terrorism-related offences after a grossly unfair trial for publishing tweets in support of women's rights.

Nearly all human rights defenders, women's rights activists, independent journalists, writers and activists in the country have been arbitrarily detained, put through prolonged and unfair trials – most often by the SCC – or released but under conditions that include travel bans and other arbitrary restrictions to their fundamental rights, such as to conduct peaceful activism.

As of January 2024, Amnesty International has documented the cases of 69 individuals who had been prosecuted solely for exercising their rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly, including human rights defenders, peaceful political activists, journalists, poets, and clerics. Of those, 32 were prosecuted for peacefully expressing their opinions on social media. Amnesty International is aware that the real number of such prosecutions is likely much higher.

PREFERRED LANGUAGE TO ADDRESS TARGET: English and Arabic.
You can also write in your own language.

PLEASE TAKE ACTION AS SOON AS POSSIBLE UNTIL: 1 July 2024.
Please check with the Amnesty office in your country if you wish to send appeals after the deadline.

NAME AND PRONOUN: Manahel al-Otaibi (she/her).

LINK TO PREVIOUS UA: [Saudi Arabia: Further Information: Manahel al-Otaibi Beaten in Detention - Amnesty International](#).