

## AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL JOINT PUBLIC STATEMENT

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# SAUDI ARABIA: NGOS CALL FOR ACCESS TO SAUDI DETAINEES, AS MANAHEL AL-OTAIBI FACES FURTHER ABUSE

We, the undersigned civil society organizations, are extremely concerned by developments threatening the safety and well-being of detained feminist and fitness instructor **Manahel al-Otaibi**. On 14 April 2024, when al-Otaibi was finally able to contact her family after having been forcibly disappeared since November 2023, she told them that she is being held in solitary confinement in Malaz Prison in Riyadh and has a broken leg as a result of physical abuse. She said she is also being denied medical visits.

This is further illustration of the authorities' contempt for the well-being of detainees in Saudi Arabia's opaque prison system, where those behind bars routinely face enforced disappearance, vicious abuse by other prisoners and guards and medical neglect. Shortly before her disappearance on 5 November 2023, ALQST learned that Manahel al-Otaibi had been subjected to various forms of abuse at the hands of another inmate, including beatings, bites and death threats. In the recent phone call with her family, al-Otaibi said that she has been subjected to further beatings since.

Al-Otaibi's abuse and denial of medical treatment in custody are part of a growing and alarming trend that places the lives of prisoners at risk. In one egregious case, Saudi cleric Musa al-Qarni was killed in his prison cell in October 2021 by other prisoners, despite having repeatedly complained to the prison administration about the risks he faced from the prisoners with whom he was incarcerated. In April 2020, iconic human rights defender Abdullah al-Hamid died in custody as a result of the authorities' repeated withholding of adequate medical treatment. Years on, the authorities have still failed to effectively investigate these and other similar deaths.

**ALQST's Head of Monitoring and Advocacy Lina AlHathloul comments:** "Al-Otaibi's plight further highlights the culture of impunity that reigns in Saudi Arabia's prison system, where the authorities are endangering the lives of prisoners of conscience and then covering up their crimes, in callous disregard for basic human rights. In light of the complete lack of transparency, there is an urgent need for independent international experts and NGOs to have access to monitor detention facilities in the country."

Manahel al-Otaibi was arrested on 16 November 2022 and faces charges under the kingdom's draconian Anti-Cybercrime Law for her peaceful promotion of women's rights, wearing "indecent" clothes, and tweeting using feminist hashtags. She is currently awaiting trial before the Specialized Criminal Court, the Saudi terrorism court notorious for conducting grossly unfair trials and handing down harsh sentences to individuals critical of the authorities. Her sister Fouz al-Otaibi faces similar charges, and fled Saudi Arabia fearing arrest after being summoned for questioning in 2022. In December 2023, the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders issued a public communication to the Saudi government regarding the cases of Fouz and Manahel, and called for the latter's immediate release.

The authorities have routinely subjected prisoners of conscience, and others arbitrarily detained, to solitary confinement and incommunicado detention, including human rights defender Mohammed al-Qahtani and humanitarian worker Abdulrahman al-Sadhan. Prolonged solitary confinement for more than 15 days is a violation of the absolute prohibition on torture and other cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment. Further, while disappeared and with no access to legal remedies, prisoners are at heightened risk of other human rights violations including sexual violence or torture.

No independent monitoring of prison conditions is currently permitted in Saudi Arabia, and the authorities refuse to cooperate with United Nations bodies, denying country access to UN special procedures mandate holders. Meanwhile, the government's official human rights body, the Saudi Human Rights Commission, has consistently failed to effectively address complaints of torture or ill-treatment within detention facilities it has visited, acting instead as a whitewashing tool for the authorities.

We urge the Saudi authorities to grant independent international observers and NGOs access to prisoners and detainees, and that they extend invitations to, and accept visits from, UN special procedures mandate holders as recommended by several states during the kingdom's recent Universal Periodic Review (UPR) before the Human Rights Council. We also call on the authorities to immediately and unconditionally release Manahel al-Otaibi and all others detained for expressing their opinions. Pending al-Otaibi's release, the authorities must ensure her safety and access to adequate medical care.

## **SIGNATORIES**

ALQST for Human Rights

Amnesty International

ARTICLE 19

DAWN

European Saudi Organization for Human Rights (ESOHR)

FEMENA

Freedom House

Gulf Center for Human Rights (GCHR)

MENA Rights Group

Middle East Democracy Center (MEDC)

The Regional Coalition for Women Human Rights Defenders in Southwest Asia and North Africa (WHRDMENA Coalition)