

Saudi Arabia moves to stamp out new human rights NGO
By Amnesty International
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Four founding members of a nascent human rights group in Saudi Arabia have been interrogated and intimidated in their attempt to get their organization off the ground, Amnesty International said.

In recent days, the four men who founded the independent Union for Human Rights in late March have been called in for questioning by the Saudi Arabian authorities and threatened with further interrogation. They remain at risk of being detained at any time.



Three of the four founders of the Union for Human Rights, a new NGO in Saudi Arabia. © Private

Abdullah Modhi al-Attawi, Mohammad Aeid al-Otaibi, Abdullah Faisal al-Harbi and Mohammad Abdullah al-Otaibi have been charged with founding and publicizing an unlicensed organization as well as launching websites without authorization.

“None of the charges against these four men relates to an internationally recognizable crime, and the irony is that it was precisely because of their attempt to formally register the organization that the authorities clamped down on them,” said Philip Luther, Middle East and North Africa Director at Amnesty International.

“The Saudi Arabian authorities must stop this repression, remove any arbitrary barriers to the organization’s registration and allow the activists to continue with their legitimate human rights work.”

Saudi Arabia lacks clear laws about how to establish a non-governmental organization (NGO).

On 1 April the four men formally informed the Saudi Arabian authorities about the newly formed Union for Human Rights and requested a licence. They did not hear back until they were each contacted separately and ordered to report for questioning at the Bureau of Investigation and Public Prosecution on 28-30 April.

The NGO’s founding statement lists among its aims: “to spread and defend the culture of human rights, enforce its principles and values, and promote the Universal Declaration of Human Rights”, and “to reinforce the role of women in political participation and social activities in accordance with Islamic Sharia [law]”.

It also aims “to abolish punitive death penalties” and “to achieve its objectives by all legally and morally legitimate means by resorting to the judiciary when deemed necessary and by activating the rule of law.”

All of its founding members have a history of activism.

Mohammad Abdullah al-Otaibi is a prominent activist who was previously arrested on 1 January 2009 for participating in demonstrations against the Israeli killing of Palestinians during its “Operation Cast Lead” offensive in Gaza in late 2008 and early 2009. He was subsequently convicted and sentenced to three years in prison.

The other three are long-standing human rights and environmental activists who have also been previously detained for their activism. One of them was a security officer in a Saudi Arabian anti-terrorism unit who resigned in protest at what he considered the security forces' inhumane practices.

Since March 2013, on behalf of the new Union for Human Rights, the four activists attended court sessions of other prominent activists and issued reports and public statements about ongoing human rights violations in Saudi Arabia.

Among the cases they had been monitoring and commenting on was the trial and detention of Dr Abdulkareem Yousef al-Khoder and Mohammed Saleh al-Bajady, co-founders of another independent human rights NGO – the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Organization (ACPRA).

“The way the Union for Human Rights' founders are being dealt with is particularly striking given the efforts they have made to engage constructively with the authorities and to refrain from what the government might consider provocative language,” said Luther.

“Their treatment mirrors a long-standing pattern of disdain for and intolerance of independent organizations by the Saudi Arabian authorities. We urge them once again to cease this harassment, to release prisoners of conscience, including Dr Abdulkareem Yousef al-Khoder and Mohammed Saleh al-Bajady, and to allow human rights defenders to carry on with their legitimate work untrammelled.”

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