

HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH

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May 26, 2015

To Whom it May Concern,

I write to recommend Waleed Abu al-Khair, an imprisoned Saudi human rights lawyer, for the Law Society of Upper Canada ("LSUC") Human Rights Award.

I have known Abu al-Khair for more than three years. I became acquainted with him through my professional work as a researcher with Human Rights Watch's Middle East and North Africa division focusing on Saudi Arabia. As part of my work, I research and document government violations of the fundamental human rights of independent activists and others who criticize Saudi government policies or speak out in favor of political or social reform. Waleed Abu al-Khair directly assisted Human Rights Watch in its research in Saudi Arabia between 2008 and his imprisonment in April 2014, providing information and freely sharing his expertise and advice on how Human Rights Watch should most effectively approach sensitive human rights issues such as religion and criminal justice reform.

Abu al-Khair has been for many years a tireless advocate for human rights reform. He and his organization, the Monitor of Human Rights in Saudi Arabia, have publicly advocated for the release of political dissidents and human rights defenders imprisoned solely for their peaceful advocacy and pushed for reform of the country's criminal justice system.

In 2009, Abu al-Khair acted as defense lawyer for a member of the "Jeddah reformists", a group of 16 men, including political and human rights activists, whom police detained after they met to establish a human rights organization. Ministry of Interior officials threatened to imprison Abu al-Khair if he continued his work and warned his father and brother that he should stop his activities.

In 2011, Abu al-Khair signed two other petitions to King Abdullah calling for political reform. One of the petitions, titled "Events in Qatif and Detainees in Jeddah," called for the release of political detainees in Jeddah and for investigations into the recent killings of protesters by security forces in the Eastern Province. Prosecutors questioned many of the signatories to the petition, including Abu al-Khair. A number were compelled by threat of prosecution to sign retractions.

Abu al-Khair began his doctoral studies in the United Kingdom in 2011. Upon returning to Saudi Arabia for the month of Ramadan, the Bureau of Investigation and Public Prosecution called him to appear before the Criminal Court of Jeddah in September. The court informed him of criminal charges against him for “offending the judiciary” and “attempting to distort the reputation of the kingdom”, citing his calls for the establishment of a constitutional monarchy, and his appearance on foreign media channels where he spoke out about the human rights situation in Saudi Arabia and the case of Samar Badawi. In subsequent sessions, prosecutors questioned him and accused him of providing information to Human Rights Watch.

In March 2012, the Ministry of Interior imposed a travel ban on Abu al-Khair, preventing him from traveling to the United States to complete a fellowship program. The ministry did not give the reasons for the travel ban or its duration as required by law.

On September 12, 2013, Abu al-Khair received a call from an official with the Prince Mohammed bin Nayef Rehabilitation Program, a Ministry of Interior-sponsored counseling program founded to re-integrate jihadists into Saudi society, summoning him to attend sessions at a center in Riyadh and stating that he would face charges in the Specialized Criminal Court. Abu al-Khair received the charge sheet on October 6, which lists at least six charges related to his peaceful human rights activity, including “setting up an unlicensed organization” and “breaking allegiance with the ruler.”

During one of the trial sessions in April 2014, officials detained Abu al-Khair on order of the interior ministry. In July 2014, the Specialized Criminal Court, Saudi Arabia’s terrorism tribunal, convicted him on all charges, sentencing him 15 years in prison, a 15-year travel ban, and a fine of 200,000 Saudi Riyals (US\$53,000).

Abu al-Khair played no active part in his trial. He refused to recognize the legitimacy of the court or to defend himself. He also refused to sign a copy of the trial judgment or to appeal either his conviction or sentence. In January an appeals tribunal within the Specialized Criminal Court overturned in part the earlier ruling following a prosecution appeal, which had suspended 5 years of his term, and ruled instead that Abu al-Khair should serve all 15 years in prison.

Authorities have shuffled Abu al-Khair among three prisons without explanation since his arrest on April 15, 2014, including stints in al-Ha’ir Prison, south of Riyadh, al-Malaz Prison, in Riyadh, and Buraiman and Dhaban Prisons, in Jeddah.

Despite pressure from Saudi authorities, Abu al-Khair courageously continued to provide detailed and reliable information to international news outlets as well as international human rights organizations such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty

International, at considerable risk to himself, until his eventual imprisonment. I strongly support Abu al-Khair's nomination for the Law Society of Upper Canada ("LSUC") Human Rights Award.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any further questions or concerns regarding this letter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Adam Coogle', with a stylized, cursive script.

Adam Coogle
Middle East Researcher
Middle East and North Africa Division
Human Rights Watch