



Abdullah al-Hamid, Mohammad Fahad al-Qahtani, & Waleed Abu al-Khair (Saudi Arabia)

“for their visionary and courageous efforts, guided by universal human rights principles, to reform the totalitarian political system in Saudi Arabia”

Short bio

Abdullah al-Hamid, Mohammad Fahad al-Qahtani, and Waleed Abu al-Khair are three of the most prominent Saudi civil and human rights defenders. They have stood defiant in their pursuit for reforms in a country where the royal family maintains a tightly controlled monopoly of power and has joined forces with ultra-conservative Wahhabi clerics to support their totalitarian rule.

The three Laureates have challenged this authoritarian system through peaceful methods, calling for universal human rights and the establishment of a constitutional monarchy. They are demanding the separation of powers and equality for all, including the abolishment of male guardianship which deprives women of their most basic rights. As a consequence of their courageous struggle for a more pluralistic and democratic society, the three men have been sentenced to between 10 and 15 years' imprisonment and all are currently in jail.

al-Hamid and al-Qahtani are academics and co-founders of one of the few Saudi human rights organisations, the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association (ACPRA) which is currently banned in the country. Abu al-Khair is best known for his legal defence of prominent Saudi activists such as Raif Badawi, and for founding another now-banned human rights organisation, Monitor of Human Rights in Saudi Arabia (MHRSA).

Their visionary and inclusive approach to shaping a positive future for their home country has been, and continues to be, a great source of inspiration for many people in Saudi Arabia and the wider Gulf region.

Long bio

Abdullah al-Hamid, Mohammad Fahad al-Qahtani, and Waleed Abu al-Khair, are three of the most respected civil and human rights defenders in Saudi Arabia. They represent the breadth and diversity of opinions calling for peaceful and democratic reforms from inside the country. Despite what could be described as enjoying privileged positions in society, they chose not to remain idle and silent about the blatant injustices that they saw occurring in their country.



While these calls are far from extreme, they are nonetheless criminalised by the Saudi authorities. Despite the risks, each of these men remained outspoken and undeterred in their desire for a more just and fair Saudi Arabia for all.

A totalitarian political system

Saudi Arabia is an absolute monarchy. The king is the head of state, head of government, supreme commander of the armed forces and head of the Shura Council (the advisory council). State legislation is based on royal decrees and the royal family dominates almost every aspect of political and economic life in the country. For more than 80 years, the ruling family from the House of Saud has maintained a tightly controlled monopoly of power and has joined forces with ultra-conservative Wahhabi clerics to support their totalitarian rule. Saudi Arabia has long been recognised as one of the most repressive and dangerous countries in the world for human rights defenders, where basic rights such as freedom of speech and assembly are denied. The country has consistently ranked among the worst nations in rights and democracy rankings, appearing 202nd out of 210 countries in Freedom House's 2018 Freedom in the World Index, and joint 159th out of 167 countries in the Economist Intelligence Unit's 2017 Democracy Index.

Calling for reforms from within

Al-Hamid, al-Qahtani and Abu al-Khair have demonstrated an unwavering commitment to the promotion of human rights and equality in Saudi Arabia. The three Laureates have sought to reform the Saudi totalitarian system through peaceful methods, calling for universal human rights, greater equality and a move towards a constitutional monarchy. Al-Hamid, al-Qahtani, and Abu al-Khair argue fervently that Islam and human rights are not mutually exclusive. Their conviction that democratic and human rights values can be incorporated into Islamic culture and institutions is seen as a threat by the Saudi regime and Wahhabi clerics who claim to have a monopoly on religious doctrine in the country. On this basis, the three Laureates have developed local answers to reform the system and have highlighted to the world that there are sufficient elements of Saudi civil society wanting to see the country reformed.

Abdullah Al-Hamid, born 12 July 1950, is a poet and Arabic professor. He is the author of several books on the question of reform in Saudi Arabia and his activism stretches back over more than 20 years. In 1993, he co-founded the Committee for the Defense of Legitimate Rights, a political advocacy group whose stated objectives include the release of political detainees and accountability for abuses by members of the ruling family.

Mohammad al-Qahtani, born 1965, holds a PhD from Indiana University and was formerly an economics professor with the Institute of Diplomatic Affairs of the Saudi Arabian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He has, for the past decade, been one of the leading proponents of human rights and political reforms from inside Saudi Arabia. In 2008, he conducted a hunger strike to protest the imprisonment of 11 activists without a fair or public trial. In 2011, he openly



supported public demonstrations by women calling for the release, or at least the fair trial, of prisoners arrested in the campaign against terrorism.

Given the State repression, the formation of independent human rights organisations within Saudi Arabia has been extremely challenging. However, in 2009, al-Hamid and al-Qahtani along with nine fellow activists created the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association (ACPRA), becoming one of the few independent civil society organisations inside the country. The organisation aimed to promote human rights in the country, along the lines of UN norms outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. They also called for political reforms, an elected parliament, and independent legal institutions that would protect citizens' rights and enforce government accountability. One of the key functions of the organisation was to monitor and document human rights abuses, drawing the ire of the Saudi authorities for highlighting torture in prisons and mass arrests of protesters.

Waleed Abu Al-Khair, born 17 June 1979, is a lawyer and holds a master's degree in the Islamic law from Alyarmook University in Jordan. Abu al-Khair has, since as early as 2007, been calling for the Saudi regime to enact political reforms towards a constitutional monarchy. His activism in support of a fairer society has been varied, involving opening up his own home as a place for people, and youth in particular, to meet and discuss social, political and religious topics. Abu al-Khair, is the founder of Monitor of Human Rights in Saudi Arabia (MHRSA), a human rights organisation he established in 2008. After unsuccessfully attempting to register the organisation inside the country, al-Khair registered the organisation with the Canadian Ministry of Labour in 2012, making it the first Saudi human rights organisation to be licensed abroad. Abu al-Khair is also known for having defended the famous activist and blogger Raif Badawi in court during his trial on blasphemy charges. Abu al-Khair has been a vocal critic of the Saudi regime. A trusted source of information, he has participated in several international conferences to discuss human rights in the gulf state. Furthermore, he has written hundreds of local articles in Arabic as well as contributing internationally for outlets such as the Washington Post and the BBC.

The price of speaking truth to power in Saudi Arabia

The three Laureates and their families have suffered greatly as a result of their promoting freedom and equality under a regime that has no respect for either.

Abdullah al-Hamid has faced persecution and imprisonment several times for his calls to establish a constitutional monarchy in the country, being arrested six separate times between 1993 and 2008. In 2005 he was sentenced to seven years' imprisonment for several charges, including "showing dissent and disobeying the ruler". He was ultimately released, along with others, after a royal pardon in August 2005. This was followed in 2008 by another sentence, for which he served four months' imprisonment. This sentence was for supposed "incitement to protest", after he had supported a group of families from the Shiite minority in their protest against the imprisonment without charges of their relatives.

The leaders and founders of ACPRA were systematically targeted by the authorities, sentenced to lengthy prison terms for providing an alternative narrative to that offered by



the Saudi regime. In March 2013, al-Qahtani was sentenced to 10 years in prison, while in the same trial al-Hamid was handed a 5-year sentence, plus another 6 years from a previous sentence for which he had been pardoned by the King. Their charges included "breaking allegiance to and disobeying the ruler", "undermining unity", "questioning the integrity of officials", "seeking to disrupt security", and "inciting disorder by calling for demonstrations". Travels bans that equal the length of their prison sentences have also been imposed on them for once they finish their sentences. Al-Hamid and al-Qahtani were convicted by the Specialised Criminal Court which was created to try terrorists but has increasingly been used against human rights activists.

Their convictions, including that of Abu al-Khair, have been roundly condemned by international organisations and institutions, including the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention which has called their detention "a violation of international human rights standards".

Abu Al-Khair was tried a year later than al-Hamid and al-Qahtani, and was granted the unenviable distinction of being the first activist to be tried under the 2014 "Terrorism-Law". On 6 July 2014, al-Khair was sentenced to 15 years' imprisonment, a 15-year travel ban and a fine of 200,000 Saudi Arabian Riyals. His charges included "striving to overthrow the state and the authority of the King", "assembling international organisations against the Kingdom", and "creating and supervising an unlicensed organisation (MHRSA). Abu Al-Khair has reported that he has suffered abuse during his incarceration, in the form of being denied food and adequate medical treatment, beatings, solitary confinement and sleep deprivation. On 7 June 2016, he started a hunger strike in protest against his conditions and treatment in prison, the strike would last five days and end in him being granted some concessions from the Jeddah Prison administration.

A source of inspiration

Abdullah al-Hamid, Mohammad al-Qahtani, and Waleed Abu al-Khair have each greatly contributed to a domestic, grassroots approach to human rights which demonstrates a Saudi solution to the realisation of universal human rights in Saudi Arabia. Their personal sacrifice and years of dedication have been a source of inspiration and hope that genuine change will be brought to Saudi Arabia. Their cases have drawn widespread international attention to the brutality and repression employed by the Saudi regime to suppress those voices who offer an alternative to their current theocratic system. Al-Hamid, al-Qahtani, and al-Khair have stood defiant in their pursuit for human rights in a country consistently classified as one of the least free and democratic states in the world.