



Joint MEP letter to the European External Action Service, High Representative Josep Borrell

Re: Addressing the ongoing persecution of women's rights defenders in Saudi Arabia in light of the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2020-2024

Dear Mr Borrell,

We, the undersigned Members of the European Parliament, continue to express our deep concern at the ongoing persecution of women's rights defenders in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

We have welcomed the establishment of the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2020-2024 to maximize prioritizing human rights topics in internal and external EU affairs. The informal EU-Saudi human rights dialogue previously set to take place by the end of 2020, **has recently been rescheduled for June 2021**. In anticipation of the exchange on human rights, we would like to underscore the commitments made by the EEAS under the EU Action Plan, particularly the EU Gender Strategy 2020-2025. Respectfully, we call Your Excellency to manifest your spoken affirmation of EU human rights values under the EU Action Plan into tangible calls to Saudi officials to integrate gendered legislative reform.

Under heightened international scrutiny since 2019, including in the form of European Parliament resolutions on women's rights defenders (2019) Saudi officials [temporarily released](#) women's rights defenders **Maysaa al-Manea, Aziza al-Yousef, Eman al-Nafjan, Hatoon al-Fassi, Amal al-Harbi, Ruqiya al-Muhareb, Shadan al-Onezi, and Abeer Namankani**, while they continued to live under heavy restrictions and face trial. Most recently, in 2021 **Loujain al-Hathloul** and **Nouf Abdelaziz** were conditionally [released](#). Al-Hathloul was released after serving a sentence imposed by Saudi Arabia's terrorism court, which places her under heavy restrictions following her release, including three years of probation and a five-year travel ban.

Women's rights defenders **Nassima al-Sadah** and **Samar Badawi** remain in detention. In a worrying development, the Public Prosecution has appealed the initial sentence issued on 25 November 2020 by the Criminal Court against Nassima al-Sadah of five years and eight months in prison, half of it suspended, seemingly with the aim of securing an even [harsher sentence](#). If the [precedents of previous cases](#) of women's rights defenders hold true, we are gravely concerned these activists will be subjected to continued silent persecution and prolonged punishment, such as extended travel bans and severe censorship, after their detention ends.

Considering that Saudi Arabia is a ratified member of multiple UN human rights conventions, including CEDAW, and a key EU ally within the Arab Gulf, we believe Saudis' continued persecution of women's rights defenders, and the compromised personal status of women within the kingdom at large, should be addressed as unequivocally as possible.

During the kingdom's 3rd Cycle UPR in 2018, the international community repeatedly called Saudi Arabia to implement gender-based equality before Saudi criminal law and to crucially reform - if not altogether abolish - the male guardianship system. Saudi Arabia, however, has failed to make substantial progress on the majority of the reforms, including **refusing to cooperate with UN Human Rights Council Special Procedures** regarding in-country visits to detention centers.

We therefore kindly urge Your Excellency to take the following steps to uphold and promote the EU's unflinching commitment to human rights in its external affairs, especially under the EU Gender Strategy 2020-2025:

- Establish a date for the informal EU-Saudi Arabia human rights dialogue in 2021 and engage with informed civil society and other experts to brief the EEAS on ongoing persecution of women and female activists in the kingdom;
- Highlight the following cases with Saudi counterparts and appeal to the Government of Saudi Arabia to immediately and unconditionally lift the sentences handed down to women's rights defenders, imprisoned since the 2018 lift on the driving ban for exercising their fundamental rights to freedom of speech and association, including: **Samar Badawi, Mayaa al-Zahrani and Nassima Al-Sadah**;
- Call the Government of Saudi Arabia to effectively reform national legislation by promulgating a criminal code and bringing the Law on Combating Crimes of Terrorism and its Financing, the Anti-Cybercrime Law, and the Law on Associations and Foundations into full conformity with international standards; and repeal all laws that discriminate against women;
- Ensure that any official EU-Saudi Cooperation Agreement manifests the EU's Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2020-2024, including the EU Gender Strategy 2020-2025, and that it outlines a structured model for implementation of necessary reforms and a concrete plan for follow-up.

In light of these actions, we would like to remind you that the deteriorating human rights situation in Saudi Arabia is met with great concern by the European Parliament and the international community at large. We therefore urge you to consider our proposal to solidify the focus of the EU's gendered human rights agenda in its interactions with Saudi Arabia.

Cordially submitted,

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