



September Crackdown  
Eight Years On

**Freedoms  
Suppressed,  
Rights Violated**



## Introduction

On 9 September 2017, Saudi Arabia witnessed one of the largest and harshest waves of arbitrary arrests targeting civil society, later known as the September Crackdown. This campaign swept up dozens of the country's most prominent clerics, intellectuals, academics, writers, journalists, and activists. It made no distinction between ideological currents, religious sects, or political orientations, but targeted a broad spectrum of independent voices who served as influential figures in Saudi society—intellectually, socially, politically, and economically.

The arrests were sudden and coordinated, carried out in a manner suggesting a pre-planned security operation, including nighttime raids on the homes of those detained, followed by holding them in undisclosed locations.

Although Saudi authorities gave no clear official explanation, the profiles of those targeted and statements by government-linked accounts indicated that the true purpose was to restructure the political, economic, intellectual, and religious landscape to align with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's agenda—silencing independent voices and eliminating public dissent.

From the outset, the crackdown was accompanied by grave human rights violations, including enforced disappearances, denial of contact with families and lawyers, ill-treatment and torture, and threats of harsh sentences, including the death penalty. The judiciary was also weaponized as a tool for political and ideological persecution, far removed from principles of justice and fairness.

Eight years on, the repercussions remain. Many detainees continue to languish in prison without fair trials or under heavy, unjust sentences, while others remain in custody without any verdicts issued against them. Meanwhile, Saudi authorities continue to ignore repeated regional and international calls for their release and an end to ongoing abuses.

This report seeks to highlight the key violations accompanying the September Crackdown and document the names of 32 prisoners still detained, according to information verified by SANAD Human Rights Organization. It is believed that more cases remain undocumented due to lack of transparency and families' fear of reporting arrests. The report also reviews sentences issued against some prisoners, cases where trials have not yet been held, and the alarming calls by the Public Prosecution to impose the death penalty on four of them.



## Key Violations

From the very outset of the September 2017 crackdown, security measures taken against detainees were marked by grave violations of domestic law and international human rights standards. SANAD has documented a number of recurring abuses that affected most detainees, the most notable of which include:

### Arbitrary arrest without judicial warrant

The arrests were carried out suddenly and without any disclosed judicial orders, often through late-night raids on private homes. This was the case with numerous detainees, such as Dr. Awad Al-Qarni, whose house was stormed after midnight with his devices confiscated; Dr. Salman Al-Ouda, arrested at night from his home in Riyadh; Dr. Hassan Farhan Al-Maliki, whose house was raided on 11 September 2017; as well as Dr. Mohammed Mousa Al-Shareef and Dr. Ibrahim Al-Faris—all taken without being shown any court warrants.

### Enforced disappearance after arrest

The crackdown was accompanied by widespread enforced disappearance. Many detainees were placed in undisclosed detention sites, with their families kept uninformed of their whereabouts for weeks or months. It is believed that nearly all detainees experienced enforced disappearance immediately after arrest. Dr. Hassan Farhan Al-Maliki was disappeared for several months, while preacher Ali Al-Omari was also hidden after arrest. Academic Ibrahim Al-Yamani has been kept in isolation since the day of his detention, while Dr. Mohammed Mousa Al-Shareef and Dr. Mohammed Al-Munajjid were held incommunicado for several weeks.

### Prolonged solitary confinement

One of the most striking practices in the September crackdown has been the prolonged use of solitary confinement, lasting months and, in some cases, years. Both Dr. Awad Al-Qarni and Dr. Salman Al-Ouda have remained in solitary confinement since September 2017 to this day. Economist Essam Al-Zamel endured long periods of solitary confinement, while thinker Hassan Farhan Al-Maliki faced intermittent isolation during his trial sessions.



Dr. Ibrahim Al-Yamani, Dr. Mohammed Mousa Al-Shareef, and Dr. Mohammed Al-Munajjid were also subjected to repeated solitary confinement, especially in the early months of detention. This practice was systematic against most detainees.

## Denial of legal representation

Another common violation against September detainees was depriving them of their right to hire an independent lawyer. Authorities routinely denied detainees the ability to appoint counsel of their choice, and in some cases imposed government-appointed lawyers without the detainee's or family's consent. This pattern was widespread in Saudi Arabia, and included prominent figures such as Hassan Farhan Al-Maliki, who was denied access to legal counsel, as well as Dr. Ali Al-Omari, among others facing the same restriction.

## Suspension of trials

Even when trials were held, they were secretive, lacked basic legal legitimacy, and were marred by serious violations—built on arbitrary detentions from the outset. Many trials were repeatedly suspended or postponed without justification. The trial of Dr. Hassan Farhan Al-Maliki was delayed multiple times over recent years, as was the case for Dr. Salman Al-Ouda and Dr. Ali bin Hamza Al-Omari, whose cases remain pending without final rulings.

## Physical and psychological torture

SANAD has documented severe physical abuse against a number of September detainees, including repeated beatings and brutal torture that posed serious threats to their lives and physical and mental integrity. Dr. Ali Al-Omari is one of the most prominent victims, subjected to repeated electric shocks and cigarette burns that left lasting scars and reportedly caused serious complications, including kidney failure. These practices were not limited to him—other detainees such as Hamoud Al-Omari and Manawer Al-Abdali also endured similar torture.

## Medical neglect and denial of essential treatment

Medical neglect has been one of the most systematic violations faced by September detainees, with prisons becoming environments that directly endanger their lives and health. Some were denied access to vital medication for chronic illnesses, leading to severe deterioration. Sheikh Salman Al-Ouda, for instance, was deprived of necessary medicine and suffered significant loss

of hearing and vision. In other cases, medical neglect compounded the effects of torture, such as with Dr. Ali Al-Omari, whose condition deteriorated into kidney failure without proper medical care. Human rights activist Mohammed bin Dleem Al-Qahtani suffered a stroke in prison, leaving him partially paralyzed, and continues to face neglect despite being over 67 years old and suffering from multiple chronic illnesses.

## Unfair trials before the Specialized Criminal Court (SCC)

Nearly all cases were referred to the SCC, which has been used as a tool against peaceful dissent. Sentences ranged between 9 and 23 years:

**Nawaf Al-Dubaikhi**

**16 years**

**Dr. Abdulaziz Al-Abdulatif**

**20 years**

**Dr. Khalid Al-Ajimi**

**23 years**

**Dr. Ibrahim Al-Nasser**

**15 years**

**Essam Al-Zamel**

**15 years**

**Mohammed Mousa Al-Shareef**

**13 years**

**Naif Al-Sahafi**

**10 years**

**Issa Al-Hamid**

**11 years**

**Yusuf Al-Ahmad**

**13 years**

**Khalid Al-Mohawesh**

**10 years**

**Dr. Ali Badahdah**

**9 years**

**Hamoud Al-Omari**

**9 years**

## Detention beyond sentence expiry

Authorities have continued holding detainees even after their sentences expired. For example, Ahmed Al-Suwaian was only released three years after completing his sentence. Dr. Ibrahim Al-Faris was sentenced in September 2020 to three years but remains in detention well past his official release date. Similarly, Musaad Al-Kathiri has not been released despite completing his term.

## Death penalty demands

At least four detainees from the September crackdown currently face prosecution demands for the death penalty solely for peaceful views and intellectual activities: Dr. Awad Al-Qarni, Dr. Salman Al-Ouda, Dr. Ali Al-Omari, and Dr. Hassan Al-Maliki.

## Placement with criminal prisoners

Some detainees were deliberately placed in wards with violent offenders, drug convicts, or extremists as a form of psychological pressure and endangerment. A notable example is Dr. Ibrahim Al-Yamani, who was transferred to a wing housing dangerous criminal prisoners.



# Major Violations

## Suffered by September Detainees

**Enforced disappearance  
following arrest**

**Arrest without judicial  
warrant**

**Denial of the right to legal  
representation**

**Prolonged solitary  
confinement**

**Unfair trials before the  
Specialized Criminal Court (SCC)**

**Suspension and  
repeated delays of trials**

**Prosecution demands  
for the death penalty**

**Detention beyond  
expiry of sentences**

**Deliberate placement with  
criminal prisoners**

**Physical and  
psychological torture**

**Medical neglect and denial of necessary medication**





## Secondly: Detainees Still in Custody

### Dr. Salman Al-Ouda

Dr. Salman Al-Ouda has spent eight full years behind bars since his arrest in September 2017, following a raid on his home over a tweet in which he called for reconciliation during the Gulf crisis. Over these years, he has endured systematic violations, including prolonged solitary confinement, shackling, denial of family contact, and an unfair, secret trial that deprived him of the right to independent legal representation. Despite this, the Public Prosecution continues to seek the death penalty against him.

On 1 September 2023, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention issued Opinion No. 2023/56, confirming that his detention is arbitrary and constitutes a grave violation of international human rights standards. Now aged 69, Al-Ouda remains in solitary confinement, suffering from worsening illnesses and severe vision loss in one eye, making his continued detention an even greater violation of his basic rights.



### Dr. Awad Al-Qarni

Since his arrest on 9 September 2017 following a raid on his home, Dr. Awad Al-Qarni, now 68, has been held in solitary confinement at Dhahban Prison in Jeddah. His last trial session was in 2020. Al-Qarni is one of Saudi Arabia's most prominent prisoners of conscience facing the death penalty, solely over tweets. He has now spent eight years in prison under harsh conditions that have drawn international criticism.





On 1 September 2023, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention concluded that his detention is arbitrary and violates multiple articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, calling on Saudi authorities to release him immediately, provide reparations, and conduct an independent investigation to hold those responsible accountable. Although the UN opinion set a six-month deadline for his release, Saudi authorities have failed to comply.

### **Dr. Ali bin Hamza Al-Omari**

Dr. Ali bin Hamza Al-Omari has spent eight years in detention since his arrest on 9 September 2017, when he was taken from his hotel room in Riyadh after midnight. The Public Prosecution continues to seek the death penalty against him over his peaceful opinions.



Inside prison, Al-Omari's health has deteriorated significantly due to deliberate medical neglect and poor detention conditions. Reports from inside confirm that he was subjected to severe torture, including beatings and electric shocks, which allegedly led to kidney failure.

### **Dr. Hassan Farhan Al-Maliki**

Dr. Hassan Farhan Al-Maliki has also completed eight years in detention since his arrest on 9 September 2017, in a case marked by the absence of any legal basis. He, too, faces the death penalty over his peaceful religious views.



Al-Maliki has endured serious violations, including the violent storming of his home that terrified his family, denial of legal counsel, prolonged solitary confinement, and months without contact with his relatives. He was even denied permission to attend his son Farhan's funeral.

The charges against him revolve entirely around his right to free expression, including: possession of "banned books," expressing his religious views in TV interviews, "insulting rulers and state-affiliated clerics," violating the Cybercrime Law, and "failing to uphold good citizenship." According to available information, his trial sessions have been stalled for years.

## Dr. Mohammed Musa Al-Shareef

Since 11 September 2017, Saudi authorities have continued to detain Dr. Mohammed Musa Al-Shareef, serving a punitive 13-year sentence after an earlier term was increased, according to human rights sources. Over his years in detention, he has faced grave abuses: a night raid with excessive force, seizure of all electronic devices, prolonged enforced disappearance, denial of family contact and independent counsel, and 20 politically-motivated charges, including “undermining the Kingdom’s security,” “membership in a terrorist organisation,” and “supporting the Palestinian resistance.”



His health has recently worsened following hernia surgery; prison authorities reportedly removed his bed and forced him to sleep on the floor, greatly aggravating his pain. He was also denied water for extended periods until he screamed from thirst without response. A former Saudi Airlines pilot, writer and historian with encyclopaedic works and media programmes, Al-Shareef is known for his pro-freedom views and rejection of authoritarianism.

## Dr. Ibrahim Al-Fares

Detained since 11 September 2017, Dr. Ibrahim Al-Fares (68) spent over three years without trial before the Specialised Criminal Court (SCC) in September 2020 sentenced him to three years—meaning he should have been released at verdict time. Authorities have nonetheless delayed his release despite the sentence having expired, a ruling that was arbitrary in the first place and based on vague charges.



As an older detainee held amid harsh conditions and deliberate medical neglect—circumstances that have recently proven fatal for others, most recently Dr. Qasim Al-Qathrdi—his continued detention raises grave concern for his physical and mental safety.

## Dr. Ibrahim bin Nasser Al-Nasser

In custody since 11 September 2017. Although the SCC initially sentenced him to only three months, authorities repeatedly overturned and increased his sentence: the Supreme Court quashed the original term after it ended and raised it to three years, then the Court of Appeal later increased it to 15 years.



He has suffered severe violations, including more than 18 months of enforced disappearance, denial of family contact and legal representation, and prolonged solitary confinement.

## Dr. Abdulaziz Al-Abdullatif

Arbitrarily detained since 11 September 2017. Despite being over 65 and suffering from chronic, life-threatening conditions, authorities persist in holding him. Prosecutors levelled politicised, catch-all charges—“disobeying the ruler,” “financing terrorism,” and “sympathy with the Muslim Brotherhood”—routinely used to criminalise free expression. From the outset he faced a terrorising home raid, enforced disappearance, denial of counsel and family contact, and a secret, unfair trial. He first received five years; after it elapsed, authorities quashed it and retried him, imposing a harsher 20-year sentence.





## Dr. Ibrahim Al-Yamani

Arbitrarily detained since 11 September 2017. He has endured serious abuses, including transfer to a ward with inmates accused of murder, theft and drug trafficking, where he received repeated death threats without prison intervention. He has also faced prolonged solitary confinement, denial of family contact and legal counsel, and secret hearings. In 2020, he was barred from attending his father's funeral.



## Dr. Yousef Al-Ahmad

Arbitrarily detained since 12 September 2017, serving a 13-year sentence after an earlier ruling was aggravated. He was first arrested in 2011 for criticising the arrest of women who took part in a peaceful sit-in at the Interior Ministry, and was re-arrested in 2017. In detention he has suffered prolonged enforced disappearance, denial of family contact and independent counsel, extended solitary confinement and physical ill-treatment. Secret hearings produced an initial four-year sentence later increased to 13 years, plus a matching travel ban. He also suffers health complications—including a herniated disc—amid deliberate medical neglect.



## Dr. Salem Al-Deeni

Arbitrarily detained since 12 September 2017, days after his removal as Deputy Minister of Labour. From the outset he faced prolonged solitary confinement, lengthy detention without judicial review, and sweeping travel bans on his entire family. Prosecutors brought vague, baseless charges, including “funding entities outside Saudi Arabia” and “criticising the ruling authorities.”



Dr. Al-Deeni holds a PhD in Mechanical Engineering from Texas A&M University and is a professor at King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals. He also holds a diploma in cognitive-behavioural counselling and is a noted civic leader for his work founding and training charities and mentoring youth.

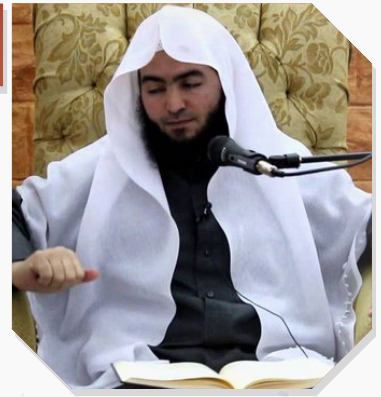
## Dr. Ali Badahdah

Detained since 12 September 2017 and transferred to Dhahban Prison (Jeddah). He has faced enforced disappearance, solitary confinement, lengthy denial of family contact, denial of counsel, and ill-treatment. The SCC issued an initial six-year sentence, later reduced to four, before being aggravated to nine years.



## Dr. Hamoud Al-Omari

In custody since 12 September 2017. He has suffered severe physical and psychological ill-treatment. In December 2020, the SCC sentenced him to nine years.



## Essam Al-Zamil

Detained since 12 September 2017 after being stopped at the airport upon returning from a global economic conference in the US. A prominent economist known for bold analysis and criticism of government policy, he was sentenced by the SCC in October 2020 to 15 years, based on tweets and vague allegations including “contact with a Qatari figure,” “membership of a banned group,” and “tarnishing the state’s reputation.” He has endured prolonged solitary confinement, a family travel ban, media smearing, and denial of a fair trial.



Al-Zamil has received major awards, including the 2009 Prince Salman Award for Young Entrepreneurs and the 2014 State Alumni Award for Achievement, and was listed by Forbes among the most influential Saudis.



## Dr. Mohammed Al-Shinnar

Detained since 12 September 2017. Years on, no final judgment has been issued. Charges include “inciting public opinion” and “contact with external parties.” He had two secret hearings, after which authorities stalled proceedings; there is no information on further sessions or a final verdict.

He suffered five months of enforced disappearance, denial of family contact and counsel, and medical neglect.



## Dr. Mohammed Al-Munajjid

Arbitrarily detained since 12 September 2017, despite being over 64. He has been denied legal representation and held in harsh conditions, with deliberate medical neglect despite chronic illnesses, including diabetes. Contact updates about his case have ceased for some time.



## Journalist Sami Al-Thubaiti

Arbitrarily detained since 12 September 2017 over a tweet calling for unity and reconciliation during the Gulf crisis. He has faced enforced disappearance and denial of a fair trial, and there is no reliable information on his place of detention.



## Khaled Al-Mohawesh

A school counsellor arbitrarily detained since 12 September 2017. He has suffered enforced disappearance, solitary confinement, denial of family contact, and denial of counsel. He was barred from attending his father's funeral and condolence rites, despite domestic law permitting it. Secret proceedings began a year after arrest without clear charges; the SCC sentenced him to 10 years, followed by a 10-year travel ban.



## Sami Al-Ghaiheb

Arbitrarily detained since 12 September 2017. He was subjected to enforced disappearance following arrest, and no information is available to Sanad on his whereabouts or conditions.



## Issa Al-Hamed

A human rights defender arbitrarily detained since 16 September 2017 over peaceful advocacy, including co-founding the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association (HASAM) and contacting international human rights groups—activities authorities framed as “tarnishing the state’s image.” The SCC had already sentenced him in April 2016 to 11 years’ imprisonment followed by an 11-year travel ban.

This is not his first detention: he was arrested in 2008 alongside his late brother, Dr. Abdullah Al-Hamed—one of Saudi Arabia’s leading reformers—who died in custody in 2020 due to deliberate medical neglect, according to documented accounts.



## Mousa Al-Ghannami

Detained since 18 September 2017. He faces vague, retaliatory charges such as “collusion with external parties” and “undermining state security.” No judgment has been reported. He has been denied family contact and a fair trial amid medical neglect and poor conditions.



## Journalist Youssef Al-Mulhim

Detained since 18 September 2017 without legal basis or fair trial, over a single tweet criticising Saudi media discourse during the dispute with Qatar—despite that crisis later being resolved. He has suffered ill-treatment by guards, denial of family visits, and a secret trial without access to independent counsel.



## Dr. Saeed bin Farwah Al-Qahtani

Arbitrarily detained since 29 September 2017. During the raid, he and his family were terrorised and his devices seized before he was taken to an undisclosed location—amounting to enforced disappearance. His family learned nothing of his whereabouts for eight months, when they discovered he had been transferred from Sha’ar Prison (Asir) to Al-Ha’ir Prison (Riyadh).





## Musaad Al-Kathiri

A media professional arbitrarily detained since September 2017. He faced enforced disappearance, denial of family contact and denial of counsel. Secret proceedings that failed basic fair-trial standards yielded a 3.5-year sentence—yet despite its expiry in September 2021, he remains detained without legal basis.



## Saud bin Ghasn

Arbitrarily detained since September 2017, seized as he exited a mosque in Taif. No reliable information is available about his whereabouts or detention conditions.



## Dr. Habib bin Ma'la Al-Mutairi

An academic and professor of literary criticism at Imam Muhammad bin Saud University, arbitrarily detained since September 2017. Security forces raided his home, seizing books and electronics, then placed him in solitary confinement at Al-Ha'ir Prison, denying him family contact and legal counsel. Authorities also refused to let him attend his father's funeral or condolences.



## Poet Nawaf Al-Dubaikhi

Detained since September 2017. The SCC handed him a 20-year sentence later reduced to 16. He has been denied family contact for long periods, deprived of the right to independent counsel, and subjected to medical neglect and poor conditions.



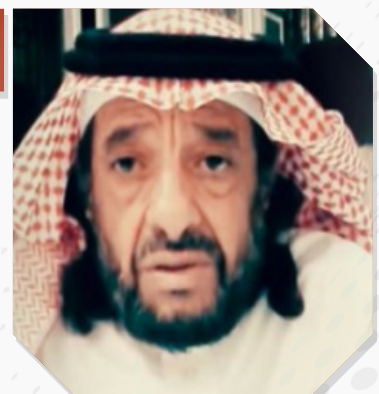
## Dr. Razeen Mohammed Al-Razeen

Former CEO of the Consumer Protection Association, detained since September 2017 without formal charges or a fair trial. He endured over 18 months of enforced disappearance in solitary confinement and a total ban on family contact.



## Mohammed bin Dleem Al-Qahtani

A human rights activist arrested in 2017 (reportedly in or after September) and still held at Al-Ha'ir Prison, Riyadh, despite being 68 and suffering multiple chronic illnesses, including diabetes and heart disease. He has faced solitary confinement and physical and psychological torture; he suffered a stroke causing left-side paralysis. Despite his critical health, authorities continue to detain him arbitrarily.



## Naif Al-Sahafi

Detained since September 2017 and serving a 10-year sentence following a secret trial that denied him fundamental due-process rights, including the right to independent counsel. He has endured prolonged enforced disappearance and long periods with no news reaching his family.



## Manawer Al-Noub Al-Abdali

Arbitrarily detained since September 2017 over his criticism of the very September crackdown in that month. He has suffered arbitrary arrest, torture and ill-treatment in detention.







## Conclusion

To this day, no precise figure is known for the total number of individuals arrested in the September 2017 crackdown, and consequently, the exact number of those still in detention remains unclear. The cases highlighted in this report are only those whose arrests have been documented. It is also important to note that SANAD Human Rights Organization has not been able to document all the violations suffered by detainees, given the extreme difficulty of obtaining information from inside Saudi prisons.

Today, after eight years of continued detention, SANAD Human Rights Organization stresses that the immediate release of all detainees has become an urgent necessity. They must be granted their freedom without delay, ensured fair trials if there are any charges, and protected from further abuse or injustice. Their release is not only a legal imperative, but also a human duty—one that upholds respect for human rights and the dignity of individuals who have endured years of deprivation and oppression.



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