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## **Do not forget FORB prisoners Raif Badawi, Ashraf Fayadh & Shi'a Sheik al-Habib**

***[See our Database of FORB Prisoners in Saudi Arabia](#)***

By Willy Fautré, Human Rights Without Frontiers

HRWF (29.04.2021) - Freedom of expression about religious issues is one of the pillars of freedom of religion or belief along with

the right to have, not to have, to change or to retain a religion  
the right of association  
the right of assembly and worship  
the right to share one's beliefs with others and make new members  
the right to conscientious objection to military service.

Blasphemy laws are not the only form of restriction to freedom of expression related religious issues.

Freedom of expression about religious issues includes the right to question and to criticize a number of aspects of a religion by outsiders but also by insiders. However, a state should refrain from intervening in theological debates and criminalizing dissenting opinions or so-called heresies.

**Raif Badawi** was 28 when he was arrested in 2012. He was accused of apostasy. He was also charged for setting up a website that undermined general security and ridiculing Islamic religious figures. In fact, Raif stated on the internet that Muslims, Jews, Christians and atheists are all equal. He claims he never attacked Islam and he only sought to provide a forum for open debate.

In 2013 he was sentenced to seven years in prison and 600 lashes for violating IT law and insulting Saudi Arabia's Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice through his online writings, as well as for hosting writings of others on the "Free Saudi Liberals" website. In June 2015, the Supreme Court upheld a heavier sentence of ten years in prison and 1,000 lashes. He also received a fine of one million riyal (approximately €247,314). He got a first round of fifty lashes, but, due to the continuous mobilisation of the international community, the implementation of the punishment was interrupted. There are reports his flogging resumed in October 2015 inside a prison.

In 2015, the Sakharov Prize, which is the EU's human rights award, was granted to Raif Badawi.

**Sheikh Al-Habib Mohammad bin Hassan al-Habib** was 56 when he was arrested in 2016 in Safwa City. He was charged for "Insulting religious leaders" and "calling for

sectarianism and disobedience". He was sentenced to seven years in prison. He is detained at Mabathet prison in Dammam

He denied the charges and claims he was arrested because of his sermons in which he denounced the violations of the rights and freedoms of the Shi'a minority, He also criticized the fact that the country's school curriculums included discriminatory statements and perpetuated existing misconceptions and prejudice against members of the Shi'a religious minority, who are considered "infidels".

On 8 July 2016, while traveling to Kuwait, he was arrested. On 10 July 2017, he was acquitted on the grounds of insufficient evidence, but on 4 January 2018, the first instance court decision was overturned on appeal, and he was sentenced by the appeal chamber of the Saudi Supreme Court (SCC) to seven years of imprisonment. While in detention, he was further charged with supporting protests in Qatif Governorate, and violating the Anti-Cyber Crime Law. On 26 August 2019, he was convicted by the SCC of these charges. A cassation request was turned down in the same year.

**Ashraf Fayadh** was arrested in 2014. He was accused of making blasphemous remarks during an argument in a cafe and for renouncing Islam. He denied the charges. He was sentenced to eight years in prison.

Ashraf Fayadh was born in Saudi Arabia to Palestinian refugee parents and, under Saudi law, is classified as a refugee himself. This means he does not have Saudi citizenship. He is a poet and co-curated a Saudi art show at the 2013 Venice Biennale. In February 2016, a Saudi court overturned his death sentence, instead imposing an eight-year prison term and 800 lashes. Also, he must repent through an announcement in official media. The decision by a panel of judges came after Ashraf Fayadh's lawyer argued his conviction was seriously flawed because he was denied a fair trial. In a briefing on the verdict, Abdulrahman al-Lahem said the judgment revoked the death sentence but upheld that he was guilty of apostasy. His father died of a stroke after hearing of Fayadh's death sentence, but Fayadh was not allowed to attend the funeral.

Photo : Raif Badawi, EU Human Rights Sakharov Prize 2015

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## **Raif Badawi is still in prison over a series of blog posts**

By Gayle MANCHIN Chair of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom and Nadine MAENZA Commissioner of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom.

Time (28.04.2021) - <https://bit.ly/2QG30Ge> - For years, successive U.S. administrations have given Saudi Arabia a free pass to harass, arrest and even execute those who do not accept the government's official interpretation of Hanbali Sunni Islam. One such case is peaceful blogger [Raif Badawi](#), who is serving a 10-year sentence for a series of [blog posts calling for freedom of religion or belief in the kingdom](#).

Despite years of [international concern](#) over the case, Badawi remains in prison. The Biden Administration is recalibrating the U.S.-Saudi relationship and has [indicated](#) that human rights will be at the center of its foreign-policy objectives. As such, it should react forcefully to the ongoing persecution of Badawi

and other religious dissidents in Saudi Arabia, including applying the new Khashoggi visa bans [where applicable](#).

Badawi is not the only one who has faced severe violations of his religious freedom. Recently freed activist [Loujain al-Hathloul](#) was arrested in 2018 following peaceful advocacy against religious guardianship laws. She was allegedly [subjected to torture in prison](#), pressured to sign a false confession and remains under a travel and [media ban](#). Shi'a [Sheikh Mohammed bin Hassan al-Habib](#) remains in prison after calling for greater rights for Shi'a Muslims. Poet [Ashraf Fayadh](#) is also still in jail on an eight-year sentence for allegedly questioning religion and spreading atheist thought.

Even among these egregious cases, Badawi's stands out. [Sentenced in 2014 to 10 years in prison and 1,000 whip lashes](#), Badawi has been refused access to [crucial medicine](#), thrown in [solitary confinement](#) and [denied contact with his family](#). In January 2015, he was given [50 whip lashes](#) publicly outside a mosque in Jeddah.

The Saudi government's continued detention of Badawi is a test case for the Biden Administration's willingness to use the new "[Khashoggi Ban](#)," which allows the State Department to deny U.S. visas to those who "suppress, harass, surveil, threaten, or harm journalists, activists, or other persons perceived to be dissidents for their work." The Saudi government's disregard for these serious American concerns destabilizes the U.S.-Saudi relationship. It also undermines [ongoing social and economic reform efforts](#) initiated by King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman over the last few years.

Giving the Saudi government a free pass to violate freedom of religion or belief without consequences is not a sustainable U.S. policy. The future of our relationship must be premised on respect for and protection of internationally recognized human rights and the political inclusion of dissidents who might otherwise adopt more radical positions. An inclusive vision for Saudi Arabia's future would no doubt hasten a recovery from the economic effects of COVID-19 and spur greater international business investment in the kingdom.

As such, the Biden Administration should disrupt this concerning trend of impunity in three ways. First, it should lift the waiver on sanctions to which Saudi Arabia would otherwise be subjected as a designated [Country of Particular Concern \(CPC\)](#) for religious freedom violations. Second, it should [hold accountable](#) high-level Saudi officials directly responsible for egregious religious freedom violations using the Khashoggi Ban and Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act. Finally, President Joe Biden and Secretary Antony Blinken should call publicly for Saudi Arabia, during this month of Ramadan, to grant clemency to Raif Badawi, and cease persecuting peaceful dissidents on spurious legal charges.

Photo : Ryan Rodrick Beiler—Alamy Stock Photo