

# Opinion | Saudi Arabia sentences U.S. citizen to 16 years in prison for tweets

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The Saudi government has sentenced a 72-year-old U.S. citizen to 16 years in prison for tweets he posted while inside the United States, some of which were critical of the Saudi regime. His son, speaking publicly for the first time, alleges that the Saudi government has tortured his father in prison and says that the State Department mishandled the case.

Many dictatorships unjustly imprison Americans. But while the Biden administration has gone to considerable effort to secure the release of high-profile Americans [from Russia](#), [Venezuela](#) and [Iran](#), it has been less public and less successful in securing the release of U.S. citizens held in Saudi Arabia. In fact, despite that Saudi Arabia is supposedly a U.S. ally, the Saudi government under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) is dealing with its U.S.-citizen critics [more harshly than ever](#). The latest and most egregious example concerns Saudi American Saad Ibrahim Almadi.

Almadi is not a dissident or an activist; he is simply a project manager from Florida who decided to practice his right to free speech inside the United States. But last November, when he traveled to Riyadh to visit family, he was detained regarding 14 tweets posted on his account over the previous seven years. One of the cited tweets referenced Jamal Khashoggi, the Post contributing columnist who was murdered by Saudi agents in the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul in 2018. Other tweets criticized the Saudi government's policies and the corruption in the Saudi system.

"He had what I would call mild opinions about the government," his son Ibrahim told me. "They took him from the airport."

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Almadi was charged with harboring a terrorist ideology, trying to destabilize the kingdom, as well as supporting and funding terrorism. He was also charged with failing to report terrorism, a charge related to tweets Ibrahim sent on a separate account.

On Oct. 3, Almadi was sentenced to 16 years in prison. He also received a 16-year travel ban on top of that. If he serves his whole sentence, he will leave prison at age 87 — and would have to live to 104 before he could return to the United States.

“I feel empty inside. I feel dead inside. I feel betrayed,” Ibrahim said. “He’s not only my father, he’s my best friend. He is everything to me.”

Since the arrest, Ibrahim had been working behind the scenes to urge the U.S. government to help secure his father’s release. But now, frustrated and desperate, he wants the American public to know his father’s story. Almadi has been tortured in prison, forced to live in squalor and confined with actual terrorists — all while his family was threatened by the Saudi government that they would lose everything if they didn’t keep quiet, Ibrahim said.

The State Department told Ibrahim not to speak publicly about the case, but he no longer believes that staying quiet will secure his father’s freedom. And he says that State has handled his father’s case with neglect and incompetence.

Nobody from the U.S. Embassy in Riyadh visited Almadi until May, six months after his arrest. At that meeting, Almadi declined to ask the U.S. government to intervene. Ibrahim said that Saudi jailers threaten to torture prisoners who involve foreign governments in their cases. In a second consular meeting in August, Almadi did ask for the State Department’s assistance in his case. He was then tortured, Ibrahim said.

That same month, Ibrahim came to Washington to press for action on his father’s case. His main ask was that Almadi be designated as a “wrongfully detained” U.S. citizen. That classification would elevate Almadi’s case in the eyes of the U.S. government and move the file from the State Department’s Consular Affairs bureaucracy to the Office of the Special Presidential Envoy for Hostage Affairs (SPEHA), which has a wider variety of tools to secure the release of Americans unjustly detained overseas.

According to U.S. law, an American citizen can be “wrongfully detained” if they meet any of 11 specific criteria, at least six of which seem to apply to Almadi’s case. For example, Women’s National Basketball Association star Brittney Griner was arrested for drug possession in Russia in February and given “wrongfully detained” status three months later. Ibrahim has been told for 11 months that his father’s case was under consideration. And when Almadi came up for sentencing on Oct. 3, nobody from the U.S. Embassy in Riyadh even showed up.

“I told the State Department his hearing was set for October 3 and they should attend. Afterward, over the phone, they said, ‘Oh, I’m sorry we forgot to tell the embassy,’ ” Ibrahim said. “I feel like they are just careless.”

A senior State Department official confirmed that the consular affairs office in Washington failed to alert the embassy when the hearing date was moved up, even though Ibrahim had notified them.

“Unfortunately, that information wasn’t passed [to the embassy],” the official said. “That is something we deeply regret.”

The Biden administration has raised Almadi's case with the Saudi government at senior levels, the official said. The State Department's process for determining whether Almadi will get the designation of "wrongfully detained" is still ongoing, the official said.

"We have consistently and regularly raised with Saudi officials our strong concerns over charges brought against Mr. Almadi and other American citizens for exercising what should be fundamental freedoms," the official told me. "Freedom of speech should never be criminalized."

The State Department insists that each case is judged on its merits regardless of geopolitical considerations. Yet prisoners who receive plenty of media coverage appear to get lots of attention from the White House. When it comes to Saudi Arabia, the Biden administration has taken a hands-off approach and resisted confronting Riyadh on such cases, which has emboldened the Saudi regime, said Ali al-Ahmed, founder and director of the Institute for Gulf Affairs.

"MBS is acting as if he believes or knows that the Biden administration won't bring pressure on them regarding American prisoners, let alone oil and other issues," he said. "The Biden White House's inaction on American hostages in Saudi prisons led to the harshest sentence against an American abroad."

The very least the State Department can do now is give Almadi the "wrongfully detained" status he clearly deserves. Until that happens, officials' assertions they are doing everything possible will continue to ring hollow to Almadi's family — and the Saudi government will continue to persecute American citizens with impunity.