

The Right to Freedom of Expression: Raif Badawi and Waleed Abulkhair



“My grandfather was a Holocaust survivor and he used to take us to Speaker’s Corner. He was in awe of the freedom of speech there because he knew what it’s like not to have any... I chose to be a judge to stand between the individual and the power of the state.” (Judge Rinder, June 3rd 2017)

Reporters Without Borders (RSF) has noted a global deterioration of press freedom in its 2017 World Press Freedom Index. Writers, activists, singers and poets are attacked or prosecuted and sometimes murdered for what they say in, for example Mexico, Russia, Belarus, Cambodia, Turkey, Zimbabwe, East Timor, Hungary and Bahrain. Saudi Arabia is currently ranked 168th out of 180 countries on the Index. 11 journalists and citizen journalists are currently jailed in Saudi Arabia.

The cases of prisoners of conscience Raif Badawi and Waleed Abulkhair, imprisoned in Saudi Arabia for making public their views about aspects of Saudi Arabian society, show why it is essential to defend this right and show the price that some courageous individuals pay for saying what they think. On 17 June 2017 Raif Badawi will have been in prison for five years and he has become an international symbol of the right of freedom of expression. It will also be Waleed’s birthday.

Raif Badawi is a blogger from Saudi Arabia. He started a blog called Free Saudi Liberals, which promoted democratic debate for all.[1] Raif was imprisoned by the Saudi authorities in 2012, charged with “setting up a website that undermines general security”, “ridiculing Islamic religious figures” and “going beyond the realm of obedience”. [2] Following a further trial for ‘apostasy’, which can carry the death penalty, Raif was sentenced to imprisonment for 10 years, fined 1 million riyal (about £200,000) and ordered to receive 1,000 lashes. In January 2015, he was lashed 50 times in public and it was broadcast on the internet, causing international outrage. At the time of writing, in June 2017, Raif has not been lashed again. He still has five years to serve in prison and the fine to pay. Several of his blog posts are collected in his book *1,000 Lashes: Because I Say What I Think*. [2]

Following anonymous death threats, his wife Ensaf Haidar and their three young children - Najwa, Terad and Miriam - fled to Canada where they were given political asylum. [2] Ensaf is a campaigner, activist and author, and spoke to groups throughout the UK during May 2017 about her experiences. [3] She has written a book, *Raif Badawi: Voice of Freedom*. [4]

Waleed Abu al-Khair is a lawyer and founder of the organization Monitor Human Rights in Saudi Arabia. [5] Among other clients, he represented Raif Badawi. Waleed was publicly critical of the Saudi Arabian government and arrested in April 2014. In July 2014 Human Rights Watch reported that he was convicted “on vague charges that stem solely from his peaceful activism, including statements to news media and tweets criticizing human rights abuses”. [6]

In July 2014, Waleed received a custodial sentence of 15 years (five years of which is suspended) and a travel ban for 15 years after he is released. He was also ordered to pay a fine of 100,000 riyals (about £20,000). Waleed was married to Samar Badawi, Raif Badawi’s sister, herself an activist. [7]

The cases of Raif Badawi and Waleed Abulkhair have been taken up by people around the world, outraged by their treatment, simply for calling for freedom, with international human rights

organizations and governments and supranational bodies condemning their punishments and demanding their release. For example, the European Parliament awarded Raif Badawi the Sakharov Prize for freedom of expression in 2015, and he was shortlisted for the Nobel Peace Prize.

Raif's children have called on the Canadian Prime Minister to help free their father:

<http://montrealgazette.com/news/quebec/demand-release-of-raif-badawi-amnesty-international-urges-justin-trudeau> *Montreal Gazette*, June 2nd 2017

Suggested activities:

1. Assemblies and vigils – using this and other materials from the sources below.
2. Discussion/project – perhaps as part of Personal, Health, Social and Citizenship** Education, Religious Education, English, History, Music, Art or Drama.
3. Lobbying your MP about the UK's relationship with and arms sales to Saudi Arabia. See: *A Shameful Relationship – UK complicity in Saudi state violence* by David Wearing: <https://www.caat.org.uk/campaigns/stop-arming-saudi/a-shameful-relationship.pdf>
4. Build a library of resources around freedom of expression and these cases – see the list below, and most organizations will have an education officer or downloadable resources.
5. Social media/web - share any work you are doing on freedom of expression.
6. Raising money and awareness for organisations working for freedom of expression everywhere.
7. Collecting signatures and writing letters to prisoners of conscience jailed for peacefully expressing their opinions and to government officials around the world.
8. See English PEN's blog with suggestions of action to support Raif and Waleed: <https://www.englishpen.org/campaigns/saudi-arabia-fifth-anniversary-of-raif-badawis-arrest-approaches/>

** The Citizenship GCSE includes students having to actively campaign. For example, the AQA course <http://www.aqa.org.uk/subjects/citizenship/gcse/citizenship-studies-8100/subject-content/active-citizenship> includes 'Following their research, students are expected to take some form of informed action based upon their research. This may take a variety of forms from letter writing, petitioning, using e-media, volunteering or establishing a group to promote a change.'

Freedom of expression is a basic human right – the right to express our views without fear of persecution, something all of us (should) have from birth. There are different ideas about what limits should be placed on what is often called 'freedom of speech'. We can look at examples from around the world to help us think about what we mean by freedom of expression. Some resources about freedom of expression in the UK and around the world are listed below.

Resources:

On freedom of expression and cases around the world

UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) Freedom of Expression Toolkit for Young People. The introduction notes: "The Freedom of Expression Toolkit builds on the premise that freedom of expression, as well as press freedom and freedom of information, are indispensable elements in the attainment of all human rights. Throughout this Toolkit there will be an emphasis on the four key elements of Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, namely the right to hold opinions without interference, the right to seek information, the right to receive information and the right to impart information to others."

<http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/resources/publications-and-communication-materials/publications/full-list/freedom-of-expression-toolkit-a-guide-for-students/>

Child Rights International Network – guide to freedom of expression rights for children around the world, including UK examples -<https://www.crin.org/en/guides/users-guides/guides-practitioners/guide-ngos/freedom-expression>

UNICEF (UK) have many educational resources on the Convention of the Rights of the Child, including discussion on freedom of expression as it relates to UK schoolchildren - <https://www.unicef.org.uk/rights-respecting-schools/teaching-resources/>

On Raif Badawi and Waleed Abulkhair

Raif Badawi Foundation Background page includes full details of trials, convictions and effects on families for both Raif and Waleed <http://www.raifbadawifoundation.org/about-raif-badawi/>

Amnesty campaign pages on Raif Badawi Several interesting blog posts and videos from the international human rights organisation, including a good blog from Ensaf Haidar <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/issues/Raif-Badawi>

English PEN campaign pages on Raif Badawi English PEN is an organization defending freedom of expression, and has organized vigils outside the Saudi Arabian embassy for Raif and Waleed since 2015, as well as several other events - <https://www.englishpen.org/tag/raif-badawi/>

Human Rights Watch Page on Saudi dissidents provides useful context - <https://www.hrw.org/report/2013/12/17/challenging-red-lines/stories-rights-activists-saudi-arabia>

A sample of UK media coverage of these cases can be found at:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-37703312> *Saudi blogger Raif Badawi faces new round of lashes*, Accessed 21 May 2017.

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3595153/The-crowd-shouting-Allahu-Akbar-man-striking-Raif-Wife-Saudi-blogger-sentenced-1-000-lashes-reveal-horror-saw-punished.html> *The crowd were shouting Allahu Akbar: a man was striking Raif with all his might*, extract from Ensaf Haidar's book published in the Daily Mail. Accessed 21 May 2017.

[1] <https://www.hrw.org/report/2013/12/17/challenging-red-lines/stories-rights-activists-saudi-arabia> Accessed 21 May 2017

[2] <http://www.raifbadawifoundation.org/about-raif-badawi/> Accessed 21 May 2017.

[3] <https://www.englishpen.org/tag/raif-badawi/> Accessed 21 May 2017

[4] <https://www.littlebrown.co.uk/books/detail.page?isbn=9780349141978>

[5] <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/saudi-arabia-free-human-rights-lawyer-waleed-abulkhair-abu-al-khair> Accessed 21 May 2017.

[6] <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/07/07/saudi-arabia-15-year-sentence-prominent-activist> Accessed 21 May 2017

[7] <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/blogs/urgent-action-network/saudi-arabia-samar-badawi-waleed-abu-al-khair-abulkhair-prison-human-rights-lawyer> accessed 21 May 2017.

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