



Freedom of Speech in Saudi Arabia

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Saudi journalist Abdul Hameed Ghabin has appeared multiple times in the international media, including the Israeli media, to express support for Israel. On live broadcasts from Riyadh, one of the most conservative states in the Persian Gulf and an absolute monarchy, Ghabin—who once opposed normalization with Israel—has criticized both the Palestinians and Iran and has spoken openly about his support for Israel’s proposed sovereignty plan for parts of the West Bank. He now languishes in prison on false allegations and faces a possible sentence of at least 10 years.

In media appearances that shook conservative Saudi Arabia, Saudi journalist and commentator Abdul Hameed Ghabin came out strongly against Iran and against the Palestinians. His public appearances, in which he expressed support for Israel and its proposed sovereignty plan for parts of the Jordan Valley, embarrassed the Saudi rulers. The regime has framed Ghabin on false charges and incarcerated him, probably for many years.

A trailblazer comes up against Big Brother

Ghabin was the first Saudi journalist to publish an [opinion piece](#) in an Israeli newspaper. That article almost caused a diplomatic incident between the Saudis and the Jordanians because it contained a proposal to transfer management of the al-Aqsa Mosque to the Saudis. The Jordanians were furious, and Ghabin was reprimanded.

No Saudi can express him- or herself freely. “Big Brother” is watching and listening to every word. The murder of Jamal [Khashoggi](#), who ran afoul of the Saudi leadership, is still a recent memory. There is no such thing as a Saudi opposition party.

Ghabin did not oppose the Saudi regime, but his media appearances made decision-makers in Riyadh uncomfortable—mainly because of the ire they raised among the Palestinian leadership, who complained bitterly about him.

From bad to worse

Ghabin had been in the authorities' sights for quite some time. They feared his sway over his readers and listeners, especially as he is considered one of the most influential Saudi journalists of recent years.

The authorities put an end to Ghabin's media appearances, but they didn't stop there. A few months ago, Saudi Arabia's Interior Ministry informed him it was revoking his citizenship. Though this was illegal (according to Saudi law, citizenship can only be revoked by the royal family), Ghabin had no recourse to object. The citizenship revocation had an immediate impact on his life as well as those of his children. The day after the announcement, his children's school barred them from attending class.

Then something worse happened. Ghabin was arrested and incarcerated on trumped-up charges of committing espionage on behalf of a foreign country and falsifying documents to obtain Saudi citizenship. The foreign country referenced is almost certainly Israel. These charges could send Ghabin to prison for at least 10 years.

Before his arrest, the authorities sought to incriminate Ghabin by accusing him of supporting the Muslim Brotherhood and former Egyptian president Muhammad Morsi. They combed his Twitter account to find incriminating material to justify putting him in jail. As they found no such evidence, they resorted to simply inventing false accusations.

Not-so-normal relations

On June 17, 2020, just days before his arrest, Ghabin feared being "bumped off" or kidnapped. He posted only these words: "I'm being kidnapped." That was his last post. It was deleted a few days ago, though [his account](#) still exists.

Much has been made of thawing relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia, two nations that are cooperating more and more in an effort to thwart Iranian ambitions in the region.

But Ghabin crossed a Saudi red line. The Kingdom's authorities demand that any relations between a Saudi citizen and the State of Israel be governed strictly by them. The Saudi rulers feared his bold push toward fully normalized Saudi-Israeli relations, and were alarmed by his willingness to criticize the Palestinians in public.

Ghabin's abduction by the regime was an act of tyranny, and it illustrates the lack of freedom of expression in Saudi Arabia. Perhaps he was ahead of his time, and will yet be seen as a positive example.

It is urgent that all steps be taken to secure Ghabin's immediate release from Saudi prison. All organizations that care about human rights should be working on his behalf. For the crime of trying to exercise freedom of speech, Ghabin is now paying a heavy price.

Saudi Arabia purports to have a vision for the future, but it continues to suppress progress when it occurs.

In this [video](#), Abdul Hameed Ghabin comments on Israeli plans to annex the Jordan Valley and says he and other Saudis support the move.

This is an edited version of an [article](#) that appeared in Israel Today on July 7, 2020.

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