

TRIBUNE: FOR THE DEFINITIVE RELEASE OF LOUJAIN AL-HATHLOUL AND HER RETURN TO FRANCE!

After 1001 days in detention in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, Loujain al-Hathloul, activist implicated in favor of women's rights sentenced to a 5 years and 8 months in prison by the Saudi Specialized Criminal Court, in charge with terrorism-related issues, on December 28th, 2020, was just released.

Her liberation is **a relief**, yet **only a partial victory** for the defense of human rights. As her sentence was only suspended, not ended, Loujain Al-Hathloul remains at risk of being re-incarcerated by Saudi authorities at all times and is still banned from traveling outside of the Kingdom.

Now 31 years old, Loujain al-Hathloul is an **emblematic figure of the fight for women's rights and empowerment in Saudi Arabia**, namely considered a major partner by the United Nations' Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women. Very active on social media, and well known around the world, Loujain al-Hathloul was first arrested in 2014, while filming herself driving a car in order to demand the right for women to drive.

Four years later, in 2018, Loujain al-Hathloul, was arrested again by the Saudi authorities alongside with other Saudi women activists. At the time, Amnesty International affirmed that these women were only *"peacefully advocating for the right of women in the kingdom to drive, as well as broader reforms related to the repressive male guardianship system."* Other testimonies relayed by the Human Rights Watch reported that the charges against these women activists included exchanges they had with *"journalists based in Saudi Arabia, diplomats, and international human rights organizations, including Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International."* The Saudi authorities deemed such contacts a criminal offense.

Loujain al-Hathloul was incarcerated since May 2018. And for which motives? The ministry of Foreign Affairs argues that Loujain al-Hathloul would have been in contact with *"States which are hostile to the Kingdom"* and *"provided information classified as secret"* to them. However, the official charges against Loujain al-Hathloul only mentioned contacts with journalists and diplomats coming from Europe. These elements were confirmed during her trial. On December 14th, during the 2nd Trial Session, the Prosecution gave a list of "evidences" against Loujain al-Hathloul which included *"Tweets about her involvement in the #Women2Drive campaign, Contacting Amnesty International to speak about the situation of activists in Saudi Arabia, Audio recordings of Loujain speaking about the male guardianship system."*

Despite numerous international calls demanding her release, the Saudi authorities have always claimed that the motives of her incarceration and her detention conditions were in perfect accordance with International Law. These allegations appeared to be in contradiction with declarations of her sister for the French speaking tv channel TV5 Monde, in which she argued that Loujain al-Hathloul started a hunger strike in order to obtain the right for her family to visit her in prison. Several UN committees were then demanding her liberation, confirming her hunger strike and expressing their concern for the state of her health. Amongst its european and international partners, France had already demanded her liberation in the UN Council for Human Rights in March 2019 and in September 2020. That is, in particular because of the strong ties which exist between Loujain Al-Hathloul, her family, and France, where she lived for a part of her life.

Referring Loujain's case to the Court specialized in terrorism issues was not an innocuous decision. **It still strongly questions the way Saudi Arabia considers the fight of human rights defenders, especially the rights of women human rights defenders.**

For all these reasons, and without forgetting her special links with our country, we demand the definitive suspension of sentence and unconditional release of Loujain al-Hathloul, as well as the lift on her travel ban and her right to a safe return to France. As we focus on human rights defender Loujain Al-Hathloul, we also draw attention it to the situation of numerous women's rights activists detained around the world because of their activism. These women need the support of the international community!

Signatories:

Jean-Baptiste Moreau – Deputy (LREM) of La Creuse,
President of the France-Saudi Arabia parliamentary friendship group
and Najwa El Haïté, lawyer and town elect of Evry-Courcouronnes