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<http://www.rsf.org/saudi-arabia-authorities-urged-to-free-18-02-2014,45881.html>

Middle East/North Africa - Saudi Arabia

Arbitrary imprisonment

Authorities urged to free journalist sentenced to 12 years in jail

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Reporters Without Borders [condemns the 12-year jail sentence](#) that a Riyadh court has passed on Wadji Al-Ghazzawi, the owner of Al-Fajr TV and host of a programme called "Al-Fadfada" (Relaxed Conversation), for accusing Saudi Arabia of links with terrorism and Al-Qaeda in particular.

In its 4 February sentence, the court also [banned Ghazzawi from leaving the country for 20 years](#) after completing his jail sentence and from ever appearing on television again.

"This extremely harsh sentence shows how intolerant the authorities are towards any form of criticism or outspoken comment," Reporters Without Borders said. "The government's recent decisions on Internet usage have also flouted freedom of information.

"We urge the authorities to release all imprisoned news and information providers, drop all charges against them and to end the draconian Internet control and censorship policies."

Arrested on 12 August 2012, Ghazzawi was convicted of inciting sedition, "disobeying the sovereign" and defaming the state and judicial institutions in the programme in which he talked of regime links to Al-Qaeda. Al-Fajr TV has been closed since August 2011.

He was also charged with [posting excerpts of the programme online](#), contacting an unnamed enemy of Saudi Arabia and receiving a suspicious sum of money from this enemy.

"Al-Fadfada," which Ghazzawi launched in 2011, was one of the few TV programmes to criticize the way Saudi Arabia is governed. He hosted seven instalments – called "Intellectual terrorism," "Institutional religion," "Government corruption," "Slavery and humiliation," "Poll results," "Saudi Arabia and terrorism" and "Confiscated nation" – before the station was shut down.

Internet surveillance meanwhile keeps on being stepped up. ANHRI, a [human rights NGO](#), reported on 10 February that 41 websites containing criticism of the government would be closed within days by the Saudi culture and information ministry on the grounds that they had not complied with legislation requiring them to be registered.

According to ANHRI, the government also intends to enforce legislation requiring bloggers to use their real names instead of pseudonyms.

Saudi Arabia is ranked 164th out of 180 countries in the 2014 [Reporters Without Borders press freedom index](#).
