

**DUBLIN**

Front Line Defenders – Head Office
First Floor, Avoca Court
Temple Road, Blackrock
Co. Dublin, A94 R7W3, Ireland

info@frontlinedefenders.org
www.frontlinedefenders.org

phone +353 1 212 3750
fax +353 1 212 1001

BRUSSELS

Front Line Defenders – EU Office
Square Marie-Louise 72
1000 Brussels
Belgium

euoffice@frontlinedefenders.org
www.frontlinedefenders.org

phone +32 2 230 9383
fax +32 2 230 0028

3 March 2023

Bahrain: Human rights defender Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja taken by ambulance to emergency room with urgent heart issues and denied access to cardiologist

On 1 March 2023, prominent human rights defender **Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja** informed his family of gross ill-treatment by prison guards in relation to serious health complications that he is experiencing. On 1 March 2023 he called his family to inform them that on the evening of 28 February 2023, he experienced intense elevated and rapid heart beats, in addition to laboured breathing, and at the insistence of the prison doctor, he was transferred by ambulance from Jau Prison where he is serving a life sentence, to the emergency room at the Bahrain Defence Force (BDF) Hospital. The emergency room doctor stated that he must be immediately referred to a cardiologist. However, Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja was denied access to a cardiologist and was returned back to Jau Prison.

[Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja](#) is a Danish-Bahraini prominent human rights defender and former Front Line Defenders Protection Coordinator for the Middle East and North Africa. He is also the co-founder of Gulf Center for Human Rights (GCHR) and a former President of the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights (BCHR). In 2011, he was detained, tortured and subjected to an unfair trial on fabricated charges that led to him being sentenced to life in prison because of his human rights activities. In 2022, he was awarded the [Martin Ennals Award](#) for individuals and organisations that have shown exceptional commitment to defending and promoting human rights, despite the risks involved.

On 1 March 2023, Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja called his daughter, [Maryam Al-Khawaja](#), informing her that he was transferred by an ambulance from Jau Prison to the emergency room at the BDF Hospital on the evening of 28 February 2023. The transfer of the human rights defender was due to urgent heart-related issues which put him at immediate risk of both a heart attack and a stroke if not treated.

Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja stated that he had suffered from an episode of intense elevated and rapid heart beats, in addition to laboured breathing on the evening of 28 February 2023. The prison clinic doctor at Jau Prison examined the human rights defender and insisted on his urgent transfer to the emergency room of the BDF Hospital. Although Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja was not informed of the details of his electrocardiogram (ECG), he noted that the prison doctor seemed anxious and that his heart rate was at 130, despite it having slowed down since the episode began.

After his transfer to the emergency room at the BDF Hospital, the human rights defender underwent several tests, including an ECG examination. His condition slowly stabilised after he was given an IV injection. The emergency room doctor stated that he must be immediately referred to a cardiologist. However, Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja was denied access to a cardiologist and was sent back to Jau Prison.

While at the hospital, the security forces attempted to place the human rights defender in handcuffs. A man in plain clothes, who introduced himself as the head of security, ordered that Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja be handcuffed. The order was in violation of previous medical orders, and of an agreement between the human rights defender and the prison administration. The human rights defender protested in response to this order by leaving his hospital bed. While his act of protest prevented him from being handcuffed then, Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja believes that his denial from having an appointment with a cardiologist is an act of direct reprisal against him due to his protest. It should also be noted, that the human rights defender was tortured at the BDF hospital [on two prior occasions](#).

Professor Damian McCormack, BSc, Mch, FRCS (Orth.) has provided expert medical opinion on Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja's condition and has advised on crucial next steps. Based on the information available, Professor McCormack stated "I am very alarmed at the news that Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja has been refused cardiology assessment and denied treatment while suffering from a symptomatic cardiac arrhythmia, possible atrial fibrillation, which puts him at immediate risk of both heart attack and stroke." He added "Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja should immediately be transferred to a tertiary level cardiac care unit for diagnostics and treatment. I am anxious to facilitate his medical evacuation to Ireland if possible [..]."

Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja has been facing a systematic denial of medical treatment by the Bahraini prison administration. According to reports between January 2022 and April 2022, necessary medical treatment was actively withheld from him by the Bahraini authorities, and access to medical appointments was denied. As a direct result of the well-documented torture and mistreatment the human rights defender endured at the hands of the Bahraini authorities, Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja additionally suffers from a series of chronic and degenerative health problems and requires timely, expert medical treatment.

Front Line Defenders is profoundly concerned for the health of Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja. It urges the Bahraini authorities to allow Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja to have immediate and unconditional access to healthcare, and take all measures to guarantee his physical and psychological integrity and security. Front Line Defenders also urges the Bahraini government to immediately drop all charges against Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja and release him as it believes he is being detained solely as a result of his peaceful and legitimate human rights work.

Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in Bahrain to:

1. Take all necessary measures to guarantee the physical and psychological integrity and security of Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja by transferring him to a tertiary level cardiac care unit for diagnostics and treatment;
2. Promptly and unconditionally release Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja, and facilitate his medical evacuation to Denmark or Ireland, based on these urgent medical grounds;
3. Guarantee in all circumstances that all human rights defenders in Bahrain are free to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions.