

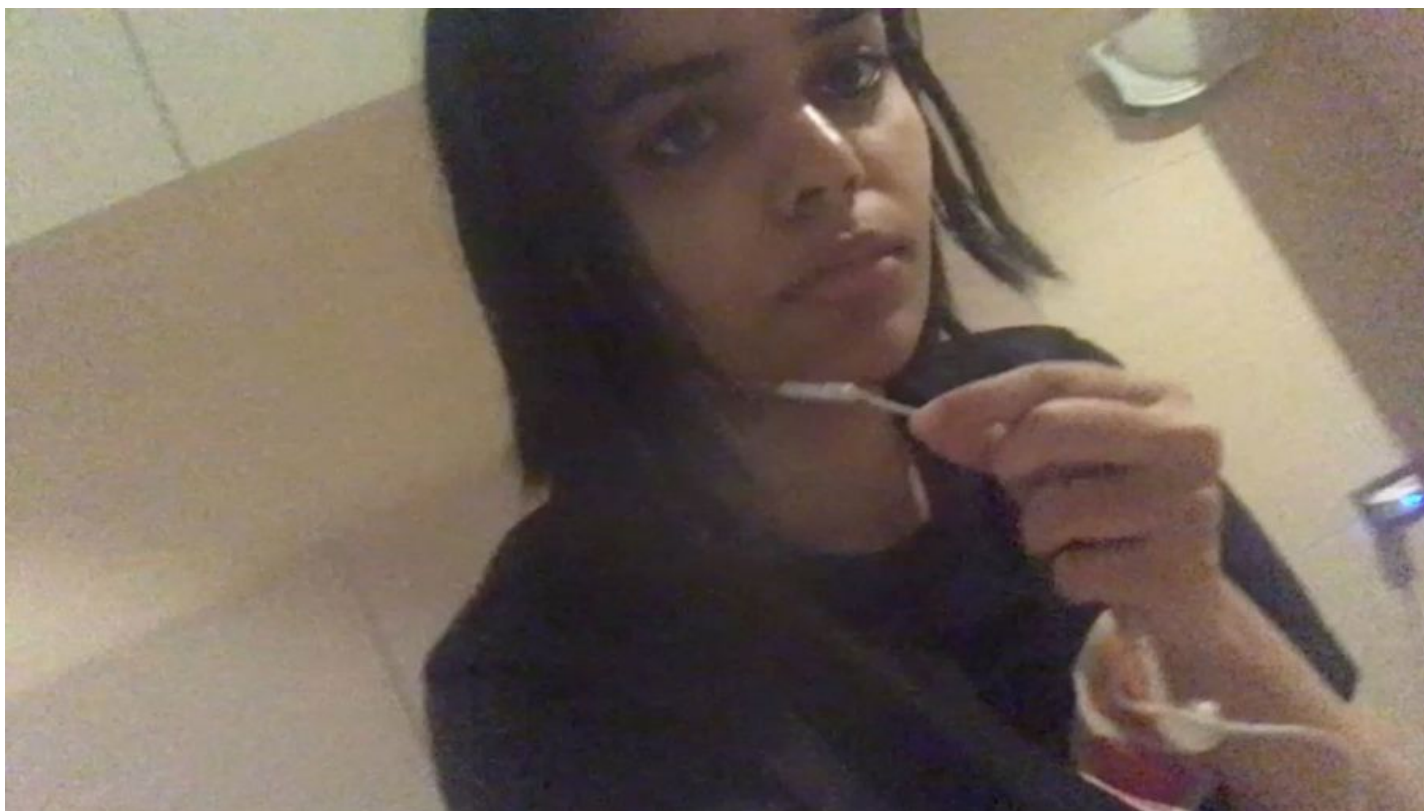


STORY

How Rahaf Mohammed Alqunun Embodies the Struggles of Many Saudi Women

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BY SARAH AZIZA



Rahaf Mohammed Alqunun speaks from Bangkok on Jan. 6 in this still image taken from a video obtained from social media. Image captured from social media / Reuters. Thailand, 2018.

On Jan. 5, 18-year-old Rahaf Mohammed Alqunun took a risk: She defied her family and the government of her native Saudi Arabia by trying to flee to Australia, where she hoped to find asylum

(https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/saudi-woman-seeking-asylum-barricades-herself-in-thailand-airport-hotel-room-demands-refugee-protections/2019/01/07/114ce658-122f-11e9-a896-f104373c7ffd_story.html?utm_term=.434f63b84b0b&tid=a_inl_manual). Behind her lay a lifetime of oppression and abuse under Saudi Arabia's restrictive male guardianship laws. By traveling without the permission of her father, Alqunun violated both Saudi law and custom, and she knew she was likely to face severe punishment — or death — should her escape plan fail.

Within hours, she'd come face to face with her worst fears. Touching down in the Bangkok airport for what should have been a brief transit, she was confronted by a Saudi diplomat and Thai authorities who seized her passport and informed her that she would be deported back to her family. Alqunun resisted, barricading herself inside her airport hotel room and tweeting pleas for asylum from her room. "I'm in real danger," she wrote in one post. She repeated her fears that her family would harm or kill her should she be returned to their custody.

Alqunun's case garnered a flurry of attention online, as human rights groups, journalists and activists took up her cause

(<https://twitter.com/reaproxy/status/1082096485079048192>). Pressure mounted on the Thai government, which had initially cooperated with Saudi officials seeking to repatriate her. Eventually, Thailand backed down, and, after a two-day stand-off, Alqunun is now under the care of the United Nations' refugee agency. But her future remains uncertain.

While Alqunun has been granted at least a temporary reprieve, her dramatic showdown is only the most recent illustration of the ongoing struggle of many Saudi women. And, despite the traumatic circumstances of her detention, she is also luckier than many, including Dina Ali Lasloom, another Saudi woman who tried to flee the kingdom in 2017 to escape a forced marriage. Lasloom was intercepted (<https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-40105983>) en route to Australia and eventually deported back to Saudi Arabia, despite expressing fear

(<https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/04/14/fleeing-woman-returned-saudi-arabia-against-her-will>) that her family, too, might kill her. Her fate remains unclear (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-46789875>).

Many others are thwarted much sooner — Saudi women traveling alone are subject to intense scrutiny at domestic airports, and countless would-be asylees never make it to their outbound flights.

Yet the fact that Alqunun — and scores of women like her each year — are still willing to take such dramatic risks testifies to the dire realities they face in Saudi Arabia. This is despite the fact that Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman has relentlessly sold himself as a liberator of women, touting promises to increase female participation in society and insisting in an interview (<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/18/world/middleeast/mohammed-bin-salman-saudi-arabia-60-minutes.html>) that women are “absolutely” equal in Saudi Arabia.

From the beginning of his ascent to power, MBS has repeatedly betrayed this supposed commitment to Saudi women. Even as he received much praise in the Western press for his decision to grant Saudi women the right to drive, he was locking up (<https://theintercept.com/2018/10/06/saudi-arabia-women-driving-activists-exile/>) the brave women who had fought for years to obtain that right.

Under the kingdom's male guardianship system, women of all ages remain legal minors who depend on the permission of their male “custodians” to travel, marry, open a bank account or even obtain a passport. (These custodians may be a husband, father, uncle or even a son — meaning an elderly woman could still have her civil and human rights curtailed by a teenager; the custodian must always be male). Women may be arrested

(<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/22/world/middleeast/saudi-women-guardianship.html>) and charged for reported “disobedience” to their guardian. In court, a woman's testimony is worth only half of a man's

(<https://www.cbsnews.com/pictures/outrageous-facts-about-saudi-arabia/18/>) and many judges are openly hostile to women who dare to bring their cases to court.

In addition to Saudi Arabia's discriminatory legal system, many equally oppressive practices persist through informal means. While many Saudi women do have supportive, empowering family relationships, many others face abusive treatment at the hands of relatives and spouses. Domestic violence is rampant (<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/saudi-arabia/2016-08-10/guardians-gender-gap>) in many Saudi communities but remains vastly underreported. Of those who dare to seek help from authorities, many are dismissed or blamed for their suffering.

For women facing such a tangled network of legal, social and religious control, prospects within Saudi Arabia can look hopeless leaving some, as Alqunun put it (<https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/talalansari/rahaf-mohammed-al-qunun-saudi-teen-friends-twitter-thailand>), with "nothing to lose."

The attempted interception of Alqunun also points to another troubling fact: The Saudi regime remains actively committed to controlling its citizens abroad, apparently unchastened by the global uproar after the brutal murder of the Saudi journalist and Washington Post contributing columnist Jamal Khashoggi. In some ways, the West is complicit in this. The gradual rehabilitation of MBS post-Khashoggi — of which President Trump has been a key player (https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/in-post-interview-trump-calls-saudi-crown-prince-mohammed-a-strong-person-who-truly-loves-his-country/2018/10/20/1eda48c0-d4d5-11e8-b2d2-f397227b43f0_story.html?utm_term=.768697895716&tid=a_inl_manual) — reinforced a dangerous sense of impunity for the crown prince.

Yet Alqunun's story also offers potential for hope: Through her courageous resistance, she has, for a moment, drawn global attention to the ongoing struggle of Saudi women. The striking image of a young woman, wielding nothing but a cellphone, facing down the force of an oppressive government is an apt metaphor for this fraught moment in Saudi Arabia's history. It illustrates both the absurdity of the regime's rabid desire for control, as well as the inevitable futility of this obsession.

Both inside and outside Saudi Arabia, Saudi women continue to push back against patriarchal control, refusing to be halted by fear. They know what their government continues to deny: No amount of intimidation can fully silence the truth, and no measure of ruthlessness can completely suppress the human impulse for freedom.

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