‘If I’m not on social media, I’m dead’: Qatari feminist activist feared killed or detained

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<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/dec/15/if-im-not-on-social-media-im-dead-qatari-feminist-activist-feared-murdered-or-detained>

Human rights groups are demanding Qatari authorities show proof of life for a feminist activist, amid growing fears that she has been killed or detained.

Noof al-Maadeed has been missing since mid-October after returning to [Qatar](https://www.theguardian.com/world/qatar) from the UK. The young activist fled the Gulf kingdom two years ago, documenting her escape on social media, after alleged attempts on her life. She had recently returned to Qatar after being given reassurance by the authorities that she was safe.

Before abruptly breaking her pattern of posting daily updates to Twitter and Instagram on 13 October, the 23-year-old told her followers to fear for her safety if she fell silent. Concerned supporters quickly began using #whereisNoof, demanding to know why she had disappeared.

A Qatari official told the Guardian that al-Maadeed is safe and in good health, but said they were unable to speak publicly due to a request for privacy.

“She said that if she is not posting on social media then it means she is dead. So we are just acting based on what she told us to do,” said Khalid Ibrahim, head of the Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR), a Beirut-based organisation which tracks violations in the Middle East. “The Qatari government can easily prove to the international community that she is alive. They have no proof, and that is of concern for us.”

GCHR said they had received multiple reports that the Qatari authorities handed al-Maadeed to her family on 13 October.

Ibrahim and other supporters of al-Maadeed have said it is the responsibility of the Qatari authorities to prove that the activist is alive and safe.

“What we know for sure is that she is at imminent risk at the moment. She was either killed or detained, there is no doubt about it,” said Ibrahim.

Ibrahim accused the Qatari authorities of reneging on their private assurances to al-Maadeed that she would be protected on her return. As a result of those assurances, al-Maadeed rescinded her application for political asylum in the UK and returned to the Gulf nation to stay in a hotel under the watch of security officials.

Al-Maadeed tweeted in early October that her father had accessed the hotel and that her life was put at risk, after three alleged previous attempts to kill her by members of her family. On 12 October she [tweeted](https://twitter.com/noofalmaadeed/status/1447939179250335754) “Sheikh Tamim is the only one who can prevent the danger to my life,” a reference to the Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani.

She tweeted “still not safe”, and later “a bit more OK”, the following day, followed by a thumbs up emoji. She has not spoken publicly since.

Al-Maadeed documented her flight from Qatar two years ago, which included stealing her father’s mobile phone to request an exit permit, as Qatari [guardianship laws](https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/03/29/everything-i-have-do-tied-man/women-and-qatars-male-guardianship-rules#:~:text=Qatari%20government%20rules%20prohibit%20unmarried,%2C%20brother%2C%20uncle%20or%20grandfather.&text=Women%20also%20cannot%20act%20as,choices%20about%20their%20children%27s%20lives.) prevent unmarried women under the age of 25 from travelling alone outside the country without the permission of a male guardian.

Her exile followed years of alleged domestic abuse and efforts by her family to curtail her movements. She [told](https://www.hrw.org/node/378307/printable/print) Human Rights Watch that “[I was] only allowed to go to school and back. Anything else [and I] can expect a beating.”

The group [raised concerns](https://www.barrons.com/news/rights-group-raises-alarm-over-qatari-woman-activist-01634318707) about al-Maadeed on 15 October, two days after her last social media update.

Human Rights Watch [reported earlier this year](https://www.hrw.org/node/378307/printable/print) that Qatari guardianship laws restrict women’s access to many basic rights, including access to some jobs, travel outside the country and reproductive healthcare. They added that a lack of clarity around guardianship legislation means socially conservative policies remain, despite changes to the law.

“Many women in Qatar do not know what the official male guardianship rules are, or their legal basis, and only know of them because of their experiences or [those] of others … in many aspects of their lives, adult women are treated as legal minors in Qatar,” they said.