



**A NURSING  
LEADER'S  
NIGHTMARE**

RULA AL-SAFFAR'S  
JOURNEY IN SEARCH  
OF JUSTICE IN BAHRAIN



By Dan Hanson '97

**At night she heard the screams.  
Her hands cuffed tightly behind her back,  
Rula Al-Saffar waited in a Bahraini jail  
cell as the guards tortured her colleagues.**

She agonized not only for her fellow medical professionals—locked up for providing medical aid to Arab Spring protestors in Manama, the capital city of Bahrain—but in fear of her own safety. She knew she would soon hear the keys unlock her own cell.

During her four-month detention in 2011, guards shocked her with stun guns, beat her, chopped off her long, black hair, and threatened to rape her. "I call it the horror days," Al-Saffar said from Bahrain during an online interview with *Widener Magazine*.

“At nighttime, they got drunk and that’s when they started torturing. My fear was not the beatings or the electricity or any of that. My fear was rape because they’re a bunch of men and you can smell alcohol on them. They would push you from one to the other and you were always afraid they would attack you at any time. They never let you sleep.”

Until her arrest, Al-Saffar, 53, had been regarded as one of the most respected medical professionals in Bahrain. After earning a master’s degree in nursing from Widener in 2000, she returned to work in her home country where she rose to president of the Bahrain Nursing Society and the rank of assistant professor at the College of Health Science in Manama. A breast cancer survivor, she founded the National Association for Cancer Awareness, serving as an inspiration to all women suffering from the disease.

In September 2011, Al-Saffar was convicted in a military trial on a slew of charges including incitement to overthrow the Bahraini government. Stripped of her positions and unable to work, her future was uncertain until June when a civil court overturned her conviction.

According to Al-Saffar, the only thing she was “guilty” of was providing medical attention to pro-democracy protesters injured by Bahraini riot police. That and being a first-hand witness to the brutality of the regime’s crack-down on the protesters. Opposition groups have told news organizations that as many as 70 people have died as a result of the violence related to the uprising.

Through it all, Al-Saffar has remained outspoken and unbowed, becoming an internationally known

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figure for her bravery in the fight for justice for her colleagues. *Arabian Business Magazine* ranked Al-Saffar 11th on its list of the world’s 500 most influential Arabs. She has frequently flashed the V-shaped peace sign with her fingers when photographed by journalists.

#### PEACEFUL PROTESTS TURNED VIOLENT

The chain of events that led to her imprisonment began on Feb. 15, 2011, when thousands of protesters, inspired by examples in Tunisia and Egypt, peaceably assembled in the center of Manama to ask for political reforms. That night, Al-Saffar worked in a medical tent set up to monitor the crowd. She left at 1:30 a.m. with an uneasy feeling, telling her colleagues to call if they needed her. A few hours later, having heard that the protests turned violent, she volunteered in the emergency room at the country’s main hospital, trying to organize the chaos and helping doctors surgically remove light-weight shotgun pellets from injured protesters.

Soon she was shocked to see some of her own colleagues—including those

she left at the medical tent earlier that morning—being carted into the hospital on gurneys, victims of riot police. “They attacked the medical tent, which had a big, red crescent on it,” she said. “They attacked our medics, our colleagues who we know by heart. It felt like you were in a nightmare that you couldn’t wake up from.”

And the injured kept coming. Hours stretched into days. With little or no sleep, Al-Saffar and her colleagues continued to treat patients—people choking and blinded by tear gas, bodies peppered by shotgun pellets, skulls cracked open by riot police batons. She kept going, pushed by her oath as a nurse to help those in need of medical attention, regardless of their political beliefs. “I remember it was eleven o’clock at night and we had several wounded people coming in and out,” Al-Saffar said. “I went and asked, ‘What is the number now?’ I was told the number of patients was 785—in one day!”

Al-Saffar soon found out that the attack on the medical tent at the center of the protest was no mistake.

As witnesses to the brutality of the government crackdown on protesters, she said doctors and nurses became primary targets of government forces. "People started attacking anybody who wore a white coat—believe it or not—even the nurses," Al-Saffar said. "The nurses began wearing black abaya, which is what women wear here in Bahrain, in order not to be recognized as nurses because we were the target of the riot police. Medics were being dragged from their cars and beaten."

#### "HORROR DAYS"

About six weeks after protests turned violent, Al-Saffar received a call from the Bahrain Criminal Investigation Directorate (CID) to come in for questioning. Her husband drove her—that would be the last time she saw him for three months. "The minute the gate closed and my husband was gone from the scene, I was blindfolded, handcuffed, and shoved into a cell," Al-Saffar said. "I had no idea what was going on."

Al-Saffar said she was interrogated and beaten on a daily basis. She soon

discovered that she was not the only one. Many of her colleagues—doctors and nurses—were also being summoned and detained, and she could hear them being tortured. "All the medics went through the same thing," she said. "It's like they gave them [guards] a menu of what to do to us all."

In protest of her treatment and that of her colleagues, Al-Saffar went on a hunger strike that lasted nearly three weeks until her release on bail on August 22.

In her battle for justice, Rula Al-Saffar has frequently flashed the peace sign for photographers.



### A CALL FOR MEDICAL NEUTRALITY

Since her release from prison, Al-Saffar has been anything but silent. Despite the constant threat of being detained and tortured again, she speaks at protests around Bahrain and has been interviewed by the international news media about the government's treatment of her and her medical colleagues. She has advocated for international support of the concept of medical neutrality, the principle of noninterference with medical services in times of armed conflict. "If there is any opportunity for me to talk to the world about what's going on, I will do it," she said. "I am not a hero—I am a human being who believes in her profession. I gave a pledge when I graduated with my master's degree from Widener to help people. I will continue to do that no matter what happens."

She also is a staunch supporter of her fellow medical professionals. When

her conviction was overturned in June, the victory was bittersweet. The guilty verdicts of 11 of her medical colleagues were upheld. "I will stand in solidarity with my colleagues," Al-Saffar said.

"I am not free until they are free."

Brian Dooley, director of the Human Rights Defenders Program for Human Rights First, heard of Al-Saffar's case from other Bahraini medics who were freed from detention prior to Al-Saffar. The organization worked to secure Al-Saffar's release from prison and continues to fight for the government to drop the charges against her medical colleagues. "She is extraordinarily defiant in an upbeat way," Dooley said. "I never saw her when she wasn't gregarious. She is a charismatic person who people look at to take a social lead.

"She has been very graphic and explicit about what has happened to her, which has been very difficult for her to articulate. She has been

enormously courageous in doing that. She's someone you look forward to meeting with. She's an energy giver. You leave time spent with her inspired and rejuvenated."

Lois Allen, a professor of nursing who taught Al-Saffar when she was enrolled at Widener, said she is not surprised by Al-Saffar's fight to protect her colleagues. "To come out of that situation still fighting speaks to the strength of her character and the strength of her spirit," Allen said.

As for Al-Saffar, she credits her battle with breast cancer for preparing her for the torture she faced in prison, and she expressed a surprising appreciation for what has happened. "It can do one of two things," she said. "It's going to make you very bitter, or it's going to make you a better person. I think, so far, it has made me a better person." 

