



ALQST

Annual Report 2019





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1. Foreword of the Director

For years the Saudi authorities have carried on their violations of human rights and harsh repression without being held to account either at home or abroad, and without people realising how much Saudi society is suffering, and the negative impact this is having on the region and the world.

Internally, the authorities managed to silence every voice by means of an iron grip on security, heavy intimidation, political prisons all over the country, brutal torture, mounting executions and a concentration of power in the hands of the king. Meanwhile there was a total absence of civil society institutions or any of the features of a modern state such as a constitution, parliament, separation of powers and clear laws, together with a complete lack of independent media, and a monolithic religious outlook aligned with the regime. Anyone who wanted to express an opinion or call for reform, or convey the facts to the world, was likely to end up being executed or imprisoned. One of the terrorist charges on which many activists in the country have been tried is “communicating with the outside world”, i.e. relaying facts to human rights organisations, international media, UN institutions or others. The other common accusation levelled at them is “inciting public opinion”, meaning attempts to make demands or raise public awareness.

Externally, the authorities built relationships on the strength of their massive wealth, buying allies, hoodwinking the media and concealing matters from international bodies. Their political allies in poor countries are given aid, while rich ones are paid bribes to keep them happy and win their support by means of corrupt deals. Such deals have tempted corrupt politicians all around the world, appealing to their greed and egotism to improve the situation of their countries and peoples, at the cost of making another country’s people suffer.

In handling domestic media, the authorities took three approaches: contain, neutralise and attack. They sought to contain the media by offering financial inducements such as subscriptions, commercial advertising and bribes, direct

or indirect. Neutralisation meant trying to avoid any dealings with media organisations, keeping them out of the picture and not allowing them to get hold of any information. And they attacked media channels by attempting to smear their reputations and trying to inflict financial losses on them by suing them and isolating those who advertised or did business with them, as well as keeping them in the dark as far as possible about what was happening in the country.

With foreign organisations, however, all they had to do was prevent them getting hold of genuine information, in a highly complex society where it is hard for such organisations to operate, and then confront them with the usual lies, things like “this is the nature of our society; people are happy with the way things are”, or “this is Islamic sharia, which the public want”, despite the fact that their version of “sharia” is a recent invention and unique to this regime, and that the public have never been polled for their opinion on the matter.

And this is why the ALQST team has such a special role to play. It is completely familiar with this environment. ALQST has detailed knowledge of the public’s concerns and aspirations. It is in touch with ordinary people from all regions and various backgrounds, and is not fooled by the stories purveyed by the authorities. It monitors the authorities’ violations one by one, at close range and directly from the scene. The team has had to act as an interface between facts and society, enabling society to see the facts for what they are, without being influenced by propaganda or the money of the perpetrators of these violations. ALQST has also been a bridge between society and the outside world, with its politicians, media, international institutions, civil and non-governmental organisations – a bridge between the Saudi society that ALQST knows, belongs to and comes from, and of whose activists and reformists it knows most if not all personally, and the outside world with which it lives and mingles and collaborates, and where it works as a member of and in partnership with other organisations to reconcile Saudi reality and international law; a bridge that the authorities cannot prevent from monitoring facts on the ground and relaying them to the world.

Internally

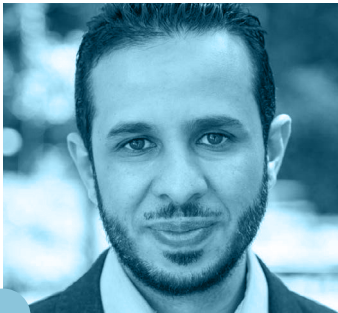
the authorities managed to silence every voice by means of an iron grip on security, heavy intimidation, political prisons all over the country, brutal torture, mounting executions and a concentration of power in the hands of the king.

Externally

the authorities built relationships on the strength of their massive wealth, buying allies, hoodwinking the media and concealing matters from international bodies.

ALQST has had to document this work, for history, for society, for the whole world, so that everyone can take up their responsibilities: political, professional, legal and, most important of all, moral and human responsibilities for those who still do not enjoy these values. ALQST therefore writes its Annual Report with care, for the sake of creating a documentary record, and for the people who will read and learn from it. It wants, firstly, to create awareness, and make known the reality that is hidden from many people around the world, and secondly to stir the consciences that many people also lack.

We want to be able to stand alongside those unjustly treated human beings who are calling out to us from behind prison bars, where no one hears them except their tormentors. Let us all stand alongside people of conscience, wherever they are in the world, against putting vested interests before innocent lives, against the pervasive and mounting injustice given cover by means of the plundered wealth of the oppressed.



Yahya Assiri
Director of ALQST for Human Rights

Human rights work should not just be a nine-to-five job, or fine words rehearsed in conference halls and written statements, followed by political bureaucracy and egotistical self-interest, and an eventual deadening of conscience, so that the perpetrators continue to get away with their crimes by virtue of holding on to power,

and victims are left still calling out for help, simply because they wanted to make the truth known and put an end to tyranny.

We have written this report for you, so that you know what happens year after year, and we invite you then not to side with injustice but to stand up for the truth. History will place us all in one camp or the other. I invite you to stand together with us on the side of the truth everywhere, even if this affects our own self-interests, so that those who violate human rights no longer do so with impunity, and people and their country are not left in danger, suffering threats and untold misery.

Thank you.

Yahya Assiri, Director of ALQST for Human Rights



2. Executive Summary

In response to the intensified crackdown on peaceful dissent, the gruesome murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi and the brutal torture of women human rights defenders in 2018, ALQST started the year 2019 by launching its global #StandWithSaudiHeroes campaign, to advocate for and show solidarity with the Saudi women's rights activists who campaigned heroically for reform but were subjected to torture and sexual harassment while in detention. During the year ALQST expanded the campaign, which is still ongoing into 2020, to include other prisoners of conscience.

The year 2019 witnessed the largest number of executions in recent Saudi history. A total of 185 individuals were executed, including 37 in a mass execution on 23 April, most of them Shia men from the Eastern Province.

Since inaction, silence or complicity will only open the way to further abuses, ALQST calls on the international community to intensify the pressure on the Saudi government.

The human rights situation in 2019 was still very much shaped by what had happened to Jamal Khashoggi inside the Saudi consulate in Istanbul on 2 October 2018, which arguably caused the Saudi authorities their biggest diplomatic crisis since the terrorist attacks of 9/11. In January the UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary and arbitrary executions, Agnès Callamard, opened a special human rights investigation on her own initiative into Khashoggi's killing. The report she presented to the UN Human Rights Council in June concluded that the murder of Khashoggi was "overseen, planned and endorsed by high-level state officials of Saudi Arabia". She believed his killing constituted an international crime over which states should claim universal jurisdiction, and she called on the Human Rights Council, the Security Council or the UN Secretary-General to demand a follow-up criminal investigation.

The Saudi authorities, however – backed and emboldened by powerful international allies – continued on their course of cracking down on any and all critical voices, targeting journalists, activists and bloggers in fresh waves of arrests. They carried on trying prisoners of conscience, including Mohamed al-Otaibi, Essa al-Nukhaifi, leading women human rights defenders, and clerics like Salman al-Odah and Hassan Farhan al-Maliki, in judicial proceedings marred by violations of international fair trial guarantees. Moreover, in a sham trial five out of 11 individuals accused in the murder of Jamal Khashoggi were sentenced to death and three others to prison while Mohammed bin Salman and his adviser Saud al-Qahtani, as well as former deputy head of intelligence Ahmed al-Asiri, were exonerated of any involvement in the crime.

The Saudi authorities also continued to commit violations of international human rights and humanitarian law in Yemen that likely amount to crimes against humanity, in a war that has not only created the world's largest humanitarian crisis but also caused more than 100,000 fatalities.



Mohamed al-Otaibi
Human rights activist and prisoner of conscience



Salman al-Odah
Scholar and prisoner of conscience



Essa al-Nukhaifi
Human rights activist and prisoner of conscience

The year 2019 also witnessed the largest number of executions in recent Saudi history. A total of 185 individuals were executed, including 37 in a mass execution on 23 April, most of them Shia men from the Eastern Province.

Meanwhile, to advance their economic Vision 2030, the Saudi authorities invested heavily in sport and entertainment and, in an attempt to whitewash the

kingdom's image and gloss over its appalling human rights record, rolled out a large-scale PR offensive seeking to attract major Western sports events to the kingdom and opened its doors to leisure tourism.

They also introduced a number of superficial reforms intended primarily to benefit women, allowing them to travel without a male guardian's permission as well as granting them more control over family matters. This, however, came nowhere close to paving the way for gender equality in Saudi Arabia, as the male guardianship system continues to severely hamper women's equal participation and decision-making in political, economic and social affairs.

The severity of the human rights situation, and the relentless efforts of international civil society and the Saudi diaspora, have however led to an unprecedented mobilisation of the global state community to publicly denounce human rights abuses committed by the Saudi government and demand accountability. The European Parliament passed a [resolution](#) in February strongly condemning the detention of leading human rights activists, and of all peaceful human rights defenders, journalists, lawyers and activists. The resolution called for an EU-wide ban on exports of surveillance systems to Saudi Arabia. In June, in the UK, the Court of Appeal ruled the UK government's decision to continue licensing exports of military equipment to Saudi Arabia unlawful; and in July both chambers of the US Congress approved resolutions cutting off arms sales to the kingdom, though these were later vetoed by President Trump. Additionally, during the course of the year, and as a response to Khashoggi's murder as well as the war in Yemen, several other governments suspended weapon sales to Saudi Arabia.

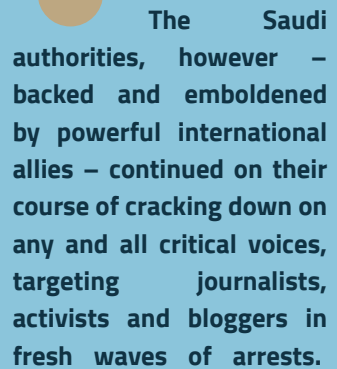
Jamal Khashoggi
Journalist



Meanwhile on 7 March 2019, in a landmark initiative at the United Nations, a group of 36 Member States led by Iceland delivered a [joint statement](#) during the 40th session of the Human Rights Council (HRC40) expressing serious concern over the human rights situation in Saudi Arabia, particularly freedom of expression, and condemning in the strongest possible terms the killing of Khashoggi. In a [second joint statement](#) in September, 25 UN Member States led by Australia raised concerns over the persecution and intimidation of activists, the practice of enforced disappearance and arbitrary detention, and reports of torture and unfair trials as well as extrajudicial executions. Furthermore, the statement called for an end to impunity over the murder of Khashoggi.

These recent initiatives of the international community to stand up against the commission of human rights violations by the Saudi authorities have inspired hope, and have also led to tangible concessions from the authorities, such as the temporary release of most of the detained women human rights defenders, who nevertheless continue to face trial, and the softening of some judicial decisions.

Since inaction, silence or complicity will only open the way to further abuses, ALQST calls on the international community to intensify the pressure on the Saudi government. The Saudi authorities should be urged to take a number of specific measures in order to improve the human rights situation in the country. The adoption of Saudi Arabia's Universal Periodic Review (UPR) in March 2019, for example, lends itself as a tool with which to monitor the Saudi government's compliance and assist it in improving its human rights record. At the time of the UPR's adoption, the government pledged to ratify the two International Covenants on human rights; to guarantee women equality; to take precautionary measures and prevent indiscriminate use of force in the war in Yemen; to apply the death penalty for only the most serious crimes; and to revise provisions in the Counter-Terrorism Law allowing for incommunicado detention. The international community should now closely follow up on these human rights commitments to ensure their full implementation. Ultimately, it will be concrete measures such as these and their implementation that will determine whether the Saudi authorities are genuinely interested in reform or are determined to persist in disregarding the rights of citizens in Saudi Arabia and abroad.



The Saudi authorities, however – backed and emboldened by powerful international allies – continued on their course of cracking down on any and all critical voices, targeting journalists, activists and bloggers in fresh waves of arrests.



3. Legal Framework

The absence of fundamental laws creates a legal vacuum

In Saudi Arabia jurisdiction is based on the Sharia (Islamic law) as interpreted by the Council of Senior Scholars, the kingdom's highest religious authority. The country has no formal constitution, only a Basic Law of Governance that fails to solidify fundamental rights and freedoms. Moreover, the kingdom does not have a criminal code but instead leaves legal interpretation to the discretion of judges. This means that the legal definition of crimes, as well as the determination and severity of their punishments, rests on the judges' discretionary interpretation of Sharia law, thus giving them enormous leeway to construe acts retroactively as crimes.

The absence of a criminal code undermines clarity and legal certainty and violates Article 11 of the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#), which states that “[n]o one shall be held guilty of any act or omission which did not constitute a penal offence, under national or international law, at the time when it was committed”. Meanwhile the legal vacuum in Saudi Arabia is being filled with pieces of exceptional legislation, which can be interpreted to include a wide spectrum of offences.

The Law on Combating Crimes of Terrorism and its Financing

On 1 November 2017 the [Law on Combating Crimes of Terrorism and its Financing](#) (the Counter-Terrorism Law) came into force, replacing the already repressive 2014 Counter-Terrorism Law. The new law defines terrorism in vague terms and does not require the use of violence in order to characterise an act as terrorist. In fact, it categorises a wide array of non-violent acts as terrorist, including “disturbing public order”, “undermining public security” and “destabilising the state or endangering its national unity”.

The law also punishes anyone who “directly or indirectly” describes the King or the Crown Prince “in any way offensive to religion or justice” with five to 10 years in prison. This law is used to criminalise acts that fall under the rights to freedom of opinion, expression, peaceful assembly and association.

Moreover, the new Counter-Terrorism Law fails to uphold due process guarantees. Articles 19 and 20 of the law grant the Public Prosecution authority to hold suspects in incommunicado detention for up to 90 days “if the investigation so warrants”, while the Specialised Criminal Court can extend the period of custody – including incommunicado detention – indefinitely. This constitutes a serious violation of due process, as it denies suspects not only contact with their families but also access to legal counsel. It places individuals outside the protection of the law and facilitates the practice of torture and ill-treatment, while prolonged incommunicado detention can constitute a form of torture in itself. Hence individuals accused under the Counter-Terrorism Law are extremely vulnerable to torture.



The Specialised Criminal Court

The Anti-Cybercrime Law

While free expression has historically been repressed and analogue publications restricted by the 2000 [Law of Printing and Publication](#), updated in 2003, the 2007 [Anti-Cybercrime Law](#) built a new framework to suppress free speech online. The vague provisions of the law are frequently used to charge and try individuals for expressing their opinions in online publications or on social media.

Article 6 of the Anti-Cybercrime Law criminalises “the production, preparation, transmission or storage of material that harms public order, religious values, public morals and privacy via an information network” with up to five years in prison and fines of up to three million Saudi riyals (US\$800,000).

The Law on Associations and Foundations

Approved in December 2015, [the Law on Associations and Foundations](#) officially came into force in March 2016. Before that date no legislation had existed to permit or regulate the establishment of civil society organisations, although the Saudi authorities had historically allowed the operation of charitable associations under tight government control.

The Law on Associations and Foundations severely restricts the formation of fully independent civil society organisations. It lays down vaguely worded grounds for denying registration to civil society organisations, including “violating Islamic Sharia”, “acting contrary to public morals” and “breaching national unity”. While it explicitly refers to educational and charitable activities, the law does not permit the establishment of human rights organisations.

The law also prohibits foreign foundations and associations from establishing branches inside Saudi Arabia and subjects domestic civil society organisations to extensive government interference in their internal affairs.

International legal obligations

On top of its national legal framework, Saudi Arabia has further committed to a number of international human rights instruments. Over the past three decades Saudi Arabia has acceded to the International Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment ([CAT](#)); the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women ([CEDAW](#)); the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination ([CERD](#)); the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities ([CRPD](#)); as well as the Convention on the Rights of the Child ([CRC](#)) and two of its optional protocols.

Accordingly, the government has pledged to uphold the standards of these conventions and to integrate their provisions and legal safeguards into national legislation. Saudi Arabia is periodically reviewed by the respective committees of these conventions, who are tasked with monitoring states’ implementation. Again and again, these UN committees have reprimanded the Saudi government for its substantial lack of implementation and failure to meet its obligations as set out in the conventions.

The overall impact on Saudi citizens

While the government fails to comply with its international human rights obligations, the existing legal framework in Saudi Arabia lacks core legislation on the one hand, and on the other comprises vaguely formulated and restrictive laws. This not only allows for the prosecution of peaceful activists but also creates legal uncertainty and therefore has a chilling effect on all citizens, who have reason to fear prosecution for everyday peaceful expression of opinions that could be retroactively construed as crimes.



4. Sustained Crackdown on Peaceful Dissent

While 2018 had already been a year of escalating human rights abuses, such as the gruesome and premeditated state killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi; the brutal torture of women human rights defenders (WHRDs); the public prosecutor's call for death sentences to be passed on prisoners of conscience, including Salman al-Odah, Awadh al-Qarni, Ali Hamza al-Amri and Hassan Farhan al-Maliki; and incessant human rights violations committed in the war in Yemen, there were further repressive developments in 2019.



Ali Hamza al-Amri
prisoner of conscience



Hassan Farhan al-Maliki
prisoner of conscience

Instead of being rebuked for his unrelenting large-scale crackdown on peaceful dissent or being held accountable for his role in the killing of Khashoggi, Mohammed bin Salman



Awadh al-Qarni
prisoner of conscience

was given carte blanche by his US allies and many others in the international community. Getting away with murder and an appalling and ever deteriorating human rights record seems to have emboldened the Crown Prince to continue in 2019 his relentless crackdown on anyone voicing criticism of the government or its reform plans.



Further waves of arrests

On 4 and 5 April, the Saudi authorities arrested at least 14 bloggers, writers and family members of women human rights defenders. They included Salah al-Haidar, son of women's rights activist Aziza al-Yousef (currently facing unfair trial), writer and physician Bader al-Ibrahim, writers Mohammed al-Sadiq, Tamar al-Marzouqi, Abdullah al-Duhailan, Moqbel al-Saqqar, Nayef al-Hindas and Khadija al-Harbi, activists Fahad Abalkhail and Ayman al-Drees, and lawyer Abdullah al-Shehri. Salah al-Haidar and Bader al-Ibrahim are both dual US-Saudi citizens.

These people detained in April were among a group of individuals who had already been placed under travel bans, some since February and others since the end of March. All of those targeted were activists, writers or social media bloggers who had previously engaged in public discourse on reforms. Their arrests appeared to be linked to their support for or connection with the women activists, and illustrated yet again the Saudi authorities' brazen disregard for the fundamental right to freedom of expression and opinion.

In September 2019 ALQST received information that the Saudi authorities had been arresting large numbers of foreign residents of various Arab nationalities, as well as Saudi nationals who employed or sponsored them under the *kafala* system. These arbitrary arrests were politically motivated and unlawful. The security services also, mostly on political grounds, arrested pilgrims and other visitors to Saudi Arabia, some of whom were subsequently released. The Saudi authorities were targeting people of certain nationalities for arrest, harassment and arbitrary expulsion, including Yemenis accused of links with the Houthi movement; Palestinians and Egyptians accused of links with the Muslim Brotherhood; and Syrians and Lebanese accused of links with the Syrian regime.

The second large wave of arrests in 2019 began on 16 November and targeted 10 activists and journalists, of both sexes. The Saudi authorities raided the homes of a number of writers in Riyadh, including Bader al-Rashed, Sulaiman al-Saikhan al-Nasser, Wa'ad al-Muhaya and Musab Fuad, before seizing their laptops and phones and arresting them. Meanwhile, in Medina, the authorities raided the home of writer Abdulmajeed al-Buluwi, arrested him and seized his mobile devices. Two days later, on 18 November 2019, the authorities raided the home of writer Abdulaziz al-Hais in the city of Ha'il, arrested him and seized his devices; two days after that, on 20 November, they raided the home of writer Abdulrahman Alshehri in the city of Abha, seized his devices and arrested him in Riyadh; and the following morning, 21 November, they raided the home of activist and blogger Fuad al-Farhan in Jeddah, arrested him and seized his devices.

ALQST has information that others were also arrested, including female journalists and writers Zana al-Shahri and Maha al-Rafidi al-Qahtani.

This further wave of arrests represented another round in the continuing and far-reaching crackdown on activists, writers and advocates of reform that has been going on ever since Mohammed bin Salman acceded to power. Due to significant international pressure and media coverage of the arrests, the Saudi authorities later released Bader al-Rashed, Sulaiman al-Saikhan al-Nasser, Fuad al-Farhan, Wa'ad al-Muhaya, Musab Fuad, Abdulaziz al-Hais, Abdulmajeed al-Buluwi and Abdulrahman Alshehri. However, the fate of Zana al-Shahri remains unknown, and Maha al-Rafidi al-Qahtani remains in detention at the time of writing this report.



Ongoing reprisals against activists

The Saudi authorities have created a dangerous environment for human rights defenders, who routinely face reprisals for carrying out their work. In fact, Saudi Arabia has featured in the UN Secretary-General's report on reprisals more often than any other country in the MENA region. Stifling dissent is a longstanding tradition in the kingdom, yet the past few years have seen an intensified crackdown on activists and human rights defenders as Mohammed bin Salman is resolutely determined to tolerate no criticism.

On 19 September 2019, UN Assistant Secretary-General Andrew Gilmour presented his annual [report](#) on reprisals against individuals who cooperate with the United Nations to the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva. The report described reprisals taken against Saudi women human rights defenders Loujain al-Hathloul, who cooperated with the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 2018, and Samar Badawi, who gave a statement at the Human Rights Council in 2014. Both have been arrested and tortured. They are still being held arbitrarily for their activism and UN engagement, and currently face trial on

charges including cooperating with the UN and human rights defenders such as ALQST Director Yahya Assiri, who is himself cited as a victim of reprisals for his engagement with UN human rights mechanisms. The report also mentioned continued reprisals against other human rights defenders, such as the ill-treatment in prison of Mohammed al-Qahtani, Essa al-Nukhaifi and Fawzan al-Harbi, including denial of medical treatment, being placed in solitary confinement and being denied family visits.

The authorities' manipulation of social media platform Twitter

Saudi Arabia is the country with the highest number of active internet users in the MENA region. According to figures from [global media insight](#), nearly 90% of the population actively uses the Internet, and 67% are active on social media



Mohammed al-Qahtani

Human rights activist and prisoner of conscience



Fawzan al-Harbi

Human rights activist and prisoner of conscience

platforms. Twitter was once perceived by many Saudi citizens as a space in which they could voice and exchange opinions that they never dared to express in real life. Yet over the years it became clear that the Saudi authorities would not tolerate freedom of expression on social media platforms, and many activists were in fact prosecuted under the Anti-Cybercrime Law for posting critical tweets. As a consequence, more and more Saudis either censored themselves or started tweeting anonymously using aliases. Two incidents in 2019 show how the Saudi government has attempted to weaponise Twitter as a tool of both surveillance and propaganda.

On 6 November 2019 two former Twitter employees were charged with spying for Saudi Arabia by accessing the company's information on dissidents who use the platform, marking the first time US federal prosecutors had publicly accused the kingdom of running agents in the United States. The indictment detailed a coordinated effort by Saudi officials to recruit employees at Twitter to look up the private data of thousands of Twitter accounts. Having access to

the company's internal systems allowed the men to see the email addresses, phone numbers and IP addresses of Twitter users. This in turn exposed those account holders, effectively ending their anonymity and therefore putting them at risk of prosecution or worse.

Stifling dissent is a longstanding tradition in the kingdom, yet the past few years have seen an intensified crackdown on activists and human rights defenders as Mohammed bin Salman is resolutely determined to tolerate no criticism.

Then in December 2019 Twitter [announced](#) that it had suspended thousands of accounts linked to a manipulation effort stemming from Saudi Arabia, as part of a crackdown on state-sponsored propaganda efforts. The social network said it was blocking some 88,000 accounts linked to Saudi state-backed "information operations" in violation of Twitter's platform manipulation rules. Most of the accounts were in Arabic and aimed at "amplifying messages favourable to Saudi authorities", with some English language content aimed at "Western audiences". Twitter's investigations traced the source of the coordinated activity to the Saudi-based social media marketing firm Smaat, which has been permanently blocked from the platform. According to Twitter, Smaat was working for high-profile individuals and

government departments in Saudi Arabia, using automated tools "to mask the overall platform manipulation originating from these accounts".



5. Systematic Violations of Fair Trial Guarantees

Saudi Arabia does not have an independent judiciary, and judicial proceedings are notorious for their systematic violations of international fair trial guarantees. Both regular criminal courts and the Specialised Criminal Court (SCC), an exceptional jurisdiction set up in 2008 to try cases of terrorism, are well known for their disregard of legal safeguards. The most common violations include denial of legal counsel, coerced confessions being admitted as evidence in court, and denial of access to criminal files, as well as insufficient time being given to prepare a defence. Trial hearings are often held in secret and the defendants themselves are at times denied access to their own hearings. The following are just some examples that illustrate how this pattern has continued during 2019.

Flawed proceedings in the trials of WHRDs

The trial of the women human rights defenders arrested between May and July 2018 began in Riyadh in March 2019. The Saudi authorities initially claimed that the women had communicated with foreign intelligence, and started a state media smear campaign portraying them as traitors, but in the end the charge sheets made no mention of contact with intelligence agencies. Instead, nearly all the charges that the public prosecution brought against them were related to their promotion of women's rights and calling for an end to Saudi Arabia's discriminatory male guardianship system, as well as sharing information with journalists, diplomats and international human rights organisations.

The women's trials were initially scheduled to take place in Saudi Arabia's Specialised Criminal Court, which deals with terrorism-related crimes, but on the evening before the opening session the Saudi authorities informed the defendants' families that the trials had been moved to Riyadh's regular criminal court. A change of venue such as this would normally require the initial court to rule that it lacked jurisdiction. This demonstrates not only that the government re-

Hatoon al-Fassi

Academic and prisoner of conscience



Abeer AlNamankani

Academic and prisoner of conscience



Maysaa al-Manea

Women rights activist and prisoner of conscience

Aziza al-Yousef

Women rights activist and prisoner of conscience

sponds to international pressure, but also that the Saudi judiciary is not independent, and the charges against the women are in fact political. Foreign diplomats and international journalists were routinely barred from entering the courtroom to monitor the hearings.

Due to mounting international pressure, including a resolution by the European Parliament and two joint statements by groups of UN member states, Hatoon al-Fassi, Amal al-Harbi, Maysaa



Eman al-Nafjan

Women rights activist and prisoner of conscience



Loujain al-Hathloul

Women rights activist and prisoner of conscience

al-Manea, Ruqiya al-Muhareb, Abeer Namankani, Shadan al-Onezi, Aziza al-Yousef and Eman al-Nafjan were granted temporary release, although their trial remains ongoing. Loujain al-Hathloul, Samar Badawi, Nassima al-Sadah, Nouf Abdelaziz and Mayaa al-Zahrani remain detained at the time of writing this report. Their trials keep being delayed for unknown reasons and no date has been set for any future trial hearing.



Samar Badawi

Women rights activist and prisoner of conscience



Nassima al-Sadah

Women rights activist and prisoner of conscience



Nouf Abdelaziz

Journalist and prisoner of conscience

The Khashoggi murder trial, shrouded in secrecy, exonerated top officials

Similarly, the trial of the 11 individuals accused in the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi was shrouded in secrecy. What we know is that the trial began on 3 January 2019 in Riyadh’s criminal court, that the prosecution referred to Khashoggi’s murder as a “rogue” operation, and that it demanded the death penalty for five of the 11 defendants. However, the identities of the accused, as well as their roles in relation to the government and details of the charges they faced, were initially kept secret.

Throughout the trial the authorities failed to provide transparency and appeared to be protecting senior figures implicated in the murder from investigation and prosecution. The UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary and arbitrary executions, Agnès Callamard, [criticised](#) Saudi Arabia’s closed-door trials of those accused of killing Khashoggi as

falling short of international standards and lacking not just transparency but impartiality. She further said that “the government of Saudi Arabia is grievously mistaken if it believes that these proceedings, as currently constituted, will satisfy the international community, either in terms of procedural fairness under international standards or in terms of the validity of their conclusions”.

On 23 December 2019, Riyadh’s criminal court sentenced Fahad Shabib Al-balawi, Turki Muserref Alshehri, Waleed Abdullah Alshehri, Maher Abdulaziz

Saudi Arabia does not have an independent judiciary, and judicial proceedings are notorious for their systematic violations of international fair trial guarantees.

Mutreb and Salah Mohammed Tubaigy to death and three others to prison for the gruesome killing of Khashoggi. Yet neither former deputy intelligence chief Ahmed al-Asiri, nor former consul-general of the Saudi consulate in Istanbul Mohammed al-Oteibi, nor the Crown Prince's adviser Saud al-Qahtani, nor Mohammed bin Salman himself was found guilty or in any way implicated in the murder.

The court thus shielded the alleged masterminds of the crime and effectively exonerated the Crown Prince and his inner circle of involvement in the murder. The verdict in fact contradicts the conclusion of both the CIA and other Western intelligence agencies that Prince Mohammed directly ordered Khashoggi's assassination. ALQST categorically rejects the verdicts handed down in the case, as the trial was neither fair nor independent. Moreover, the court did not try the real defendants, and the eventual execution of those who carried out the operation rather than those who ordered and coordinated it will have the effect of killing key witnesses to the crime.

The sentencing of cleric Salman al-Odah has been endlessly postponed

On 4 September 2018 the trial commenced before the Specialised Criminal Court in Riyadh of prominent Islamic scholar Salman al-Odah, who had been arrested on 9 September 2017 after calling for mediation in a dispute between the Saudi and Qatari rulers. During the first session of the trial al-Odah was informed of the 37 charges against him, most of which were related to his peaceful expression of opinions and religious views as well as alleged connections to Qatar. On the same day, and as a shock to many people, the public prosecution revealed that it was seeking the death penalty against him.

More than a year later, the SCC has still not pronounced a verdict. In the meantime dozens of trial hearings have been scheduled, a majority of which were postponed for unknown reasons while others were held without al-Odah present in court. Most of the hearings excluded the public, press and foreign diplomats from observing the proceedings. From October 2019 the court kept scheduling and postponing a final sentencing hearing, and then in mid-December it announced that a new series of regular hearings would be held to examine additional religious writings by al-Odah as evidence of his opposition to the Saudi authorities. The latest hearing was held on 31 December 2019 and no date for any future hearing has been communicated to his family.



6. Torture and Ill-Treatment of Detainees

Systematic torture in a climate of impunity

Torture is practiced systematically in Saudi Arabia, both to extract confessions during interrogations and as a form of punishment during detention. Although detainees have reported telling courts of torture they have suffered, investigations are virtually never conducted into such allegations, and coerced confessions are routinely admitted as evidence against the accused. Methods of torture and ill-treatment include beating, flogging, electric shocks, sleep deprivation, incommunicado and prolonged solitary detention, and threats of raping or killing victims' relatives.

While Saudi Arabia has been a party to the UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment since 1997, Saudi law is not in line with international standards and does not offer sufficient legal safeguards to protect individuals from torture. The law does not contain provisions to ensure the absolute and non-derogable prohibition of torture, nor does it define torture as prescribed by the Convention. The absence of legal safeguards, when there is frequent denial of legal counsel and medical care and use of incommunicado detention, creates a conducive environment and increases the likelihood of torture.

In a [report](#) published following his country visit to Saudi Arabia in 2017, the then UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights while countering terrorism stated that: “The failure of Saudi Arabia to provide minimum procedural safeguards during detention and interrogation, and its judicial practice of admitting coerced confessions into evidence, strongly suggests that the practice is officially endorsed.” He further stated that although more than three thousand allegations of torture were formally recorded between 2009 and 2015, he was not aware of a single case in which an official had been prosecuted. This illustrates the culture of impunity that applies to public officials who are guilty of acts of torture and other ill-treatment.

Recently documented torture cases

From November 2018 on, reports emerged of the brutal torture of detained women human rights defenders (WHRDs) in different prisons (including the Mabaheth Prison in Dammam, Dhahban Prison in Jeddah and Al-Ha'ir political prison in Riyadh) or in places known as “the hotel” and “the officers’ guest-house” where their interrogation took place. The women were subjected to beating, flogging and electric shocks, some of them being left unable to walk or stand properly, with uncontrollably shaking hands, or with torture marks on their bodies. Some were also threatened with death or sexually assaulted. At the time of writing this report, some of the WHRDs, including Nassima al-Sadah and Loujain al-Hathloul, continue to be subjected arbitrarily to prolonged periods of solitary confinement, which increases the risk of, and can in itself constitute, a form of torture and ill-treatment. The torture of female detainees is particularly worrying as it was previously unheard of in Saudi Arabia.

In late October 2019 ALQST received news that London-based Saudi dissident Abdullah al-Ghamdi’s mother Aida and his younger brother Adel had been severely tortured by the Saudi authorities. Aida al-Ghamdi was arrested with excessive force on a street in Jeddah on 28 March 2018 together with her youngest son Adel al-Ghamdi, in connection with financial transactions between her and her elder son Abdullah, who was living in London. Aida al-Ghamdi suffered several violations of her rights, including arrest without a warrant, denial of essential healthcare, solitary confinement, and denial of a fair and open trial in an independent court. She underwent various forms of torture including a severe beating in front of her son Adel, who was beaten as well, and flogging with a heavy rope. The mother’s body also bore marks of cigarette burns.

ALQST also has information about the torture in 2019 of several lesser known activists, both men and women, who had previously been active on Twitter. They are currently being detained in various prisons as well as unofficial places of detention, including the places where the leading women human rights defenders were tortured earlier in the year.

Hunger strikes over ill-treatment and harassment

Prisoners of conscience in Saudi Arabia regularly face harassment and intimidation inside prison. This can vary from constantly being moved around from place to place and held incommunicado for prolonged periods to receiving repeated punishments such as having books and medication withheld – as has been the experience of activists Abdullah al-Hamid, Mohammed Fahad al-Qahtani, Fawzan al-Harbi, Abdulaziz al-Shubaili, Essa al-Nukhaifi and Waleed



Abdullah al-Hamid

Human rights activist and prisoner of conscience



Abdulaziz al-Shubaily

Human rights activist and prisoner of conscience



Waleed Abu al-Khair

Human rights activist and prisoner of conscience

Abu al-Khair, among others. Some have been transferred to a so-called “high security building”, and some have been subjected to beatings by so-called “order maintenance forces”. As a consequence, prisoners of conscience have sometimes gone on hunger strikes to demand improvements to their prison conditions.

In May 2019 human rights defender Abdulaziz al-Shubaily, a member of the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association (ACPRA), went on hunger strike in protest over multiple instances of harassment while in detention. Among other things, he was transferred to a cell block with poor hygiene facilities and a defunct ventilation system; he was deprived of sunlight for two months; and he had restrictions placed on his communication with the outside world. Again, in November, he was transferred from Onayza Prison to a high security unit at Buraydah Prison. Al-Shubaily’s treatment is part of a pattern of harassment to which the majority of prisoners of conscience are subjected in Saudi prisons.

On 26 November 2019 Waleed Abu al-Khair was transferred to a high security unit in Dhahban Prison, where he was placed in solitary confinement and subjected to different forms of ill-treatment, including prolonged exposure to the sun, having his books taken away, and having his bedding suddenly removed at night. On 29 November he went on hunger strike in protest against his ill-treatment, and after nearly two weeks the authorities returned him to his previous cell. Yet once again, on 11 December, they raided Abu al-Khair’s cell as well as that of blogger Raif Badawi and transferred them both, with their hands and feet tied, to a high security unit. This prompted the two men to start a new hunger strike, which Badawi ended after 14 days. Abu al-Khair was transferred to hospital on 9 January 2020 due to a deterioration in his health, but at the time of writing this report he was still refusing food.

On 22 December 2019 ALQST received a written message from prisoner of conscience Khaled bin Suleiman al-Omaid, who has been detained since July 2018. Al-Omaid managed to smuggle out a message he had written on a piece of tissue, in which he protested against being detained without charge and without being brought before a court. The note went on to say that he refused to be designed to silence anyone with an opinion different from that of the government, and he stressed the country's need of a constitution. Al-Omaid also urgently requested a visit from an envoy of the UN Human Rights Council, and called on all prisoners of conscience to join the hunger strike, which he believed to be the only way for them to obtain their rights and freedom. Al-Omaid had previously been imprisoned for eight years as a result of having publicly criticised human rights violations. After being released in 2017, he filed a complaint about acts of torture to which he alleged he had been subjected during his detention, but instead of having his allegations investigated, al-Omaid was rearrested. He remains on hunger strike at the time of writing this report.



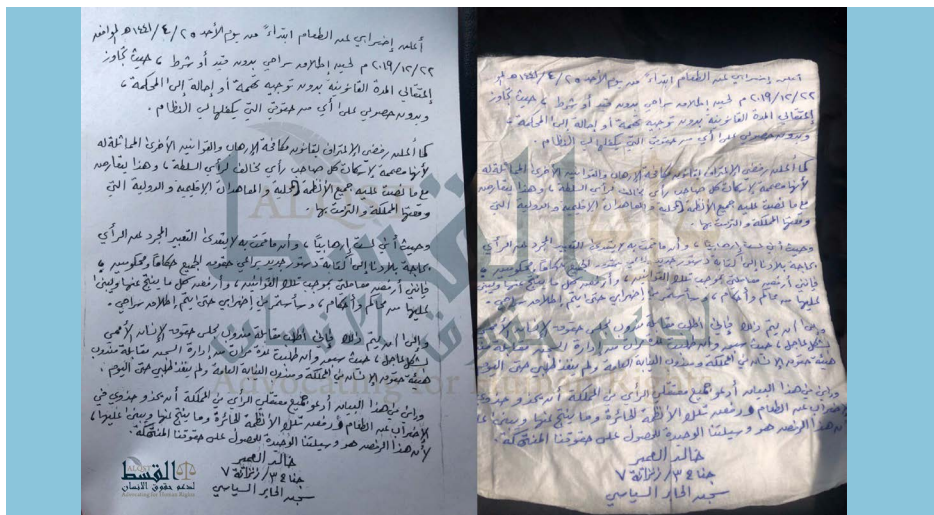
Raif Badawi

Human rights activist and prisoner of conscience



Khaled al-Omaid

Human rights activist and prisoner of conscience



7. Upsurge in Use of the Death Penalty

Saudi Arabia has for many years been among the countries carrying out the highest number of executions in the world. Yet, despite Mohammed bin Salman's pledge in 2018 to reduce use of the death penalty, 2019 witnessed the largest number of executions in recent Saudi history. According to figures published by the official Saudi Press Agency, a total of 185 individuals were executed, 94 of them Saudi citizens while the rest were foreign nationals, mainly from Pakistan, Yemen and Syria. The majority were executed for non-violent drug offences, followed by murder and charges described as terrorism-related by the authorities but which include peaceful acts.

Despite Mohammed bin Salman's pledge in 2018 to reduce the use of the death penalty, 2019 witnessed the largest number of executions in recent Saudi history. According to figures published by the official Saudi Press Agency, a total of 185 individuals were executed, 94 of them Saudi citizens while the rest were foreign nationals, mainly from Pakistan, Yemen and Syria.

While international human rights treaties including the Arab Charter on Human Rights, which Saudi Arabia ratified in 2009, clearly restrict use of the death penalty to the "most serious crimes", the Saudi authorities continue to apply the death penalty for a wide range of non-violent offences that do not meet this threshold, including drug-related crimes, witchcraft and apostasy. Moreover, Saudi courts regularly issue death sentences following severely flawed trials.

Given the lack of a criminal code, individuals are sentenced to death under the discretion of the judge. In many cases the death penalty is pronounced by way of ta'zir. While Sharia law clearly prescribes specific punishments (hudud) for certain crimes, there are other crimes for which the punishment (ta'zir) is not codified but left to the discretion of a judge, without reference to any legal text prescribing the death penalty.

The Saudi authorities continue to apply the death penalty for a wide range of non-violent offences.

On 23 April 2019 the Saudi authorities announced the execution of 37 individuals in various parts of the country. The majority were Shia men who had been convicted following unfair trials for various alleged crimes, including protest-related offences, espionage and terrorism. In a communication sent to the Saudi authorities in July 2019, six UN Special Procedures mandate holders raised concerns that these individuals were reportedly subjected to acts of torture and ill-treatment including prolonged solitary confinement and confessions obtained under torture; denial of access to medical care in detention and lengthy pre-trial detention; denial of access to legal representation before and during trial; and denial of access to the charges brought against them.

Among those executed in April were Salman Al Quraish, Mujtaba al-Sweikat and Abdulkareem al-Hawaj, who were minors at the time of their alleged crimes. Under international law, including the International Convention on the Rights of the Child, which Saudi Arabia ratified in 1966, there is an absolute prohibition on use of the death penalty against individuals under the age of 18 at the time of the crime. Also among the executed was Munir Al Adam, a young man who suffered from a hearing disability and had been the subject of two UN communications in [2016](#) and [2017](#) as well as a [decision](#) by the UN Committee on the Rights of People with Disabilities in 2018. The execution of these men thus shows that Saudi Arabia not only blatantly disregards its international human rights obligations but also ignores explicit recommendations by UN human rights bodies.

Saudi courts regularly issue death sentences following severely flawed trials.



Shia cleric Sheikh
Nimr al-Nimr

The mass execution of 23 April 2019 was the largest since January 2016, when Saudi Arabia executed 47 men on a single day, including Shia cleric Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr as well as a number of minors and individuals suffering from disabilities. What adds an additional layer of cruelty to these executions is that the families of those on death row are neither given any prior notice to say goodbye to their loved ones nor, in many cases, handed back their bodies for a dignified burial.



8. The War in Yemen

In 2020 the war in Yemen will enter its sixth year. According to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project ([ACLED](#)), which tracks confirmed fatalities in the conflict, the cumulative number of fatalities passed the 100,000 mark in 2019, including over 12,000 civilians killed in direct attacks, as well as estimates of more than 85,000 dead as a result of the ongoing famine. While the actual number may be even higher, the statistics also show that this year was the second deadliest in the conflict after 2018.

Since March 2015, Saudi Arabia has been supporting the official Yemeni government in an international military operation against Houthi forces who took control of the capital, Sana'a, in 2014. The ensuing conflict has caused not only large numbers of civilian casualties but also extensive destruction of civilian infrastructure, including hospitals and schools. A blockade imposed by the Saudi-led coalition, combined with the denial of humanitarian access by the Houthi forces, has resulted in the world's largest humanitarian crisis.

The UN Group of Eminent Experts on Yemen, which was established by the Human Rights Council to carry out a comprehensive examination of the human rights situation in the country, published its most recent [report](#) on 3 September 2019 after investigating violations since September 2014. The report sets out the detailed findings of the Group and suggests that all parties to the conflict in Yemen are responsible for an array of human rights violations and violations of international humanitarian law that are likely to amount to war crimes.

The report illustrates the immense and wide-ranging impact of these violations on the lives of Yemeni citizens, including the psychological toll of the ever-present threat of death through shelling, airstrikes or landmines. The Saudi-led coalition and its allies remain responsible for the highest number of reported civilian fatalities from direct targeting, as their attacks have struck areas densely populated by civilians, such as residential areas and markets. Civilians were not given warnings to leave areas of operations, and mandatory precautions to

avoid or minimise civilian casualties were ignored. Coalition air strikes also notably destroyed farmland, water facilities and essential port infrastructure, all indispensable to the survival of the civilian population, as well as imposing a de facto naval blockade on Yemen and the closure of Sana'a International Airport, essentially stopping the import of vital relief supplies. These serious breaches of international humanitarian law may amount to war crimes.

In recent years international aid, of which Saudi Arabia has hypocritically contributed a large portion, has been gathered to halt the deterioration of the humanitarian crisis. However, due to ongoing blockades it has proved insufficient and not reached all people in need. Moreover, aid can only address the symptoms of the conflict; long-term improvements are impossible without a political solution and as long as the war continues.

Aid, of which Saudi has hypocritically provided a large portion, can only address the symptoms of the conflict; long-term improvements are impossible without a political solution.



While Saudi Arabia and the UAE are arguably the two foreign states with the largest direct military involvement, in the interests of securing their geopolitical influence, they are also assisted and armed by Western governments. In this regard, the UN report also made reference to the 2013 Arms Trade Treaty, which prohibits the transfer of conventional arms if the exporting state has knowledge that they will be used in the commission of mass atrocities, including war crimes. The report concluded that for all states, including those not party to the Arms Trade Treaty, arms transfers to members of the Saudi-led coalition may trigger state responsibility, in the sense that they may violate the obligation of states to cooperate to bring to an end any serious breach of international law. In certain cases, the provision of arms or logistic support could amount to knowingly aiding or assisting in the commission of an internationally wrongful act, hence making the state providing arms responsible for such an act.



9. Ongoing Human Rights Violations

The right to freedom of assembly and association

Public demonstrations are prohibited in Saudi Arabia, and freedom of assembly is not respected. Indeed, the government has imposed harsh punishments – including the death penalty – on those who have led or participated in public protests. Hundreds of individuals are detained in Saudi Arabia for activities that fall within the category of free assembly. Many activists have been convicted on charges of taking part in demonstrations or peaceful protests. Some have been sentenced to death for offences including demonstrating, and some have been tortured into confessing to things they have not done. While no large-scale demonstrations or marches typically take place due to the repressive environment, smaller protests are staged from time to time in various parts of the country, particularly in the mainly Shia al-Qatif governorate.

The right to freedom of association is also severely curbed. There is no law in Saudi Arabia guaranteeing the right to form labour unions or organise strikes, and workers who engage in such activities are liable to punishment, including prison, or expulsion in the case of non-Saudi nationals. There is, however, some provision for “workers’ committees” to do basic collective bargaining. Although a law on associations and foundations was introduced in 2015 for the first time in Saudi history, it does not permit the establishment of human rights organisations, and some of its provisions are clearly designed to restrict the formation of fully independent civil society associations and institutions.

There have been numerous cases in which activists were in fact prosecuted for exercising their fundamental right to freedom of association. The case of the Jeddah Reformers dates back to 2007, when the authorities rounded up a total of 16 activists accused of “trying to form a group opposing the ruling regime”. They were sentenced in 2010 to harsh jail terms of up to 30 years. Similarly, all 11 members of the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association (ACPRA) were given long prison sentences for, among other things, “operating an unlicensed

organisation”; two have since been released but the other nine remain in jail. Others detained on similar grounds include Waleed Abu al-Khair, for founding the Monitor of Human Rights in Saudi Arabia (MHRSA) and Mohamed al-Otaibi for founding the Union for Human Rights. Aziza al-Yousef was barred from setting up a refuge for female survivors of domestic violence before being arrested and subjected to torture and sexual harassment. These are all examples of the authorities’ determination to stamp out any attempt by civil society to organise and form associations.

The Saudi prison system

Most Saudi prisons are characterised by overcrowding, medical and administrative neglect, corruption, and a prevalence of crime and drugs. The authorities do not allow inspection visits to Saudi prisons by independent organisations, and have turned down repeated requests from organisations such as Amnesty International. The Saudi authorities also ignored a request sent by British MPs on 2 January 2019 to visit eight female activists detained in Saudi Arabia, following allegations that they had been subjected to torture and ill-treatment. The Saudi authorities have on rare occasions allowed journalists or international experts to visit prisons; however, in an attempt to distort the grim reality of prison conditions in the country, the visitors were only taken to selected showcase facilities with cell blocks that had previously undergone cosmetic improvements.

There are broadly two types of prisons in Saudi Arabia: the special or political prisons of the Mabatheth (General Investigations Directorate) and the general criminal prisons of the Ministry of Interior’s General Directorate of Prisons. Mabatheth prisons are political prisons used for the detention of suspects in cases designated “terrorist” or relating to the security of the ruling family and authorities, and in cases concerning political parties, groups, organisations, cell formations and so on. The Ministry of Interior’s General Directorate of Prisons runs two types of facility: general prisons and penitentiaries. General prisons hold inmates who are serving prison terms for common law or civil offences, as well as suspects in all kinds of cases, criminal and civil, providing a harsh experience for them both before and during their trials. If found guilty and sentenced, they are then transferred to a prison facility of the second type, a penitentiary. Penitentiaries categorise and house prisoners according to their crimes, from drug abuse to murder. These prisons are notorious for their poor conditions, including overcrowding, malnutrition, poor medical care and hygiene, ill-treatment and drug abuse.

In addition, the Ministry of Social Affairs operates care homes for children and young people who get into trouble, which effectively function as detention facilities. There are separate categories of care home for male and female youth offenders. The way girls and young women under 30 years of age are treated in young women's care institutions varies from one facility to another, but what they all have in common is poor regulation and weak oversight by the authorities. Chaos reigns, by and large, in the institutions for young male offenders between the ages of 7 to 18. Harsh punishment has come to be the dominant feature of these institutions.

Not only are the conditions in Saudi detention facilities not in line with the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners, but ALQST has also recorded numerous cases in which prisoners were tortured and suffered medical neglect resulting in deteriorating health or even death. On 13 November 2019 cleric Fahd al-Qadi died in Malaz prison due to medical neglect. The same day, a 38-year-old Saudi activist from Al-Awamiya, Hussein al-Ribh, died at the Mabatheth prison in Dammam. The circumstances of his death remain unknown.



Marwan al-Muraisy
Journalist and prisoner of conscience



Abdulrahman al-Sadhan
Humanitarian worker and prisoner of conscience

Enforced disappearance

The practice of enforced disappearance is systematic and widespread in Saudi Arabia. It is used by the authorities to silence activists, journalists or anyone critical of the government. It is also part of a larger pattern of arbitrary arrests that are followed by shorter or longer periods of enforced disappearance before victims reappear to face trial. This means that most people who get arrested in Saudi Arabia endure periods of enforced disappearance. Exactly how long this situation lasts depends on whether or not the family and relatives enquire about the victim and demand to know their fate, and also how well known the victim's name is in the media or among NGOs and UN bodies. Detainees tend to remain disappeared for longer if no one asks about them.

Sometimes enforced disappearances have continued for a very long time, raising concerns for the safety and fate of the victims. Examples include journalist Marwan al-Muraisy, who was arrested by security forces in June 2018 and was only able to contact his family for the first time in May 2019, after almost a year of enforced disappearance. Similarly, humanitarian worker Abdulrahman al-Sadhan was arrested in March 2018 by secret police from his workplace at the headquarters of the Saudi Red Crescent in Riyadh. To the dismay of his family, he has not reappeared and his fate remains unknown to this day.

The situation of migrant workers

Migrant workers in Saudi Arabia make up roughly one-third of the country's inhabitants, approximately 10 million out of an estimated 34 million people, according to Saudi Arabia's [General Authority for Statistics](#). Of these, 75% come from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Egypt and the Philippines. They face multiple problems due to a number of complex and thorny regulations in the Labour Law and private sector regulations. The kafala system under which migrant workers are employed in Saudi Arabia ties the worker to an individual resident who is his or her sponsor. This makes the worker vulnerable to exploitation, as the sponsor can change the nature of the employment and sometimes transfer the sponsorship against the employee's will. The sponsor can also terminate the employment and expel the worker from the country without notice, while the worker cannot leave Saudi Arabia without an exit visa. Workers who abscond due to ill-treatment and unbearable working conditions end up working in the black market and risk further exploitation.

The absence of any independent organisations to protect migrant workers, often paired with insufficient support from their own embassies and the lack of access to justice, exposes them to further risk of abuse. Arguably the most vulnerable category of migrant workers are domestic workers, who often find themselves being required to work around the clock seven days a week, having their wages withheld and their passports confiscated, and being employed to do work outside their job description, sometimes involving sexual exploitation. There have been cases where housemaids were found working in several houses in rotation, and sponsors were hiring out female workers by the hour for their own gain. Again, the situation varies according to the worker's nationality and the protection they are able to get from their country's embassy.

Stateless persons

Saudi Arabia hosts a sizable number of stateless persons, or "Bidoon" (meaning in Arabic "without", i.e. without nationality). In the absence of official statistics, estimates suggest the number of Bidoon to be anywhere between [70,000](#) and

250,000 individuals. They consist mainly of descendants of nomadic tribes who failed to register for Saudi nationality when the nation state was being formed in the 1930s and the so-called “Mawalid” born to families who came as pilgrims to visit the holy places and stayed on illegally. For the latter, Saudi Arabia is the only country they have ever known or lived in.

Whatever the reasons for their statelessness, the Bidoon today suffer in every aspect of their lives. There are no clear or specific arrangements for their education, and while some manage with great difficulty to enrol in primary education, others are unable to do so – and higher education is completely out of reach. Stateless persons are not entitled to medical treatment, either, and there have been cases where hospitals have turned them away, even in emergencies, because they do not have a Saudi ID card or passport. As a general rule, the Bidoon cannot work or earn an income, yet the government offers them no financial support. The authorities do not normally allow them to work in the public sector, but neither do they let them register businesses or property, so sometimes the only way they can live is by doing menial jobs in the informal economy or with the help of charities.

Stateless persons’ lack of documentation also heavily impacts their family lives and means that their marriages are not officially registered, even if the person they are marrying has citizenship, and they similarly struggle to obtain birth certificates for their children. Being deprived of both their civil and political rights and their economic, social and cultural rights, stateless persons in Saudi Arabia have an extremely hard existence and are often forced into a life of grinding poverty or crime. The numbers of Bidoon are growing, and with no serious or swift solutions in sight the situation is likely to become even worse.

Saudi Arabia has ratified neither the Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons nor the Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness, and Saudi nationality law, officially referred to as the Saudi Arabian Citizenship System, is severely flawed. Article 9, for example, requires applicants for citizenship to supply documents relating to their previous nationality, which the Bidoon do not have. In addition, Article 10 contains a loophole giving ultimate power in cases of naturalisation to the Ministry of Interior, stating that “the Minister of Interior has the right, in all cases and without giving a reason, to refuse consent to the granting of Saudi Arabian citizenship to an eligible foreigner”. The Bidoon therefore continue to live a life in limbo without any legal protection whatsoever.



10. Cosmetic Reforms and PR Offensive

In 2019, in a bid to restore Saudi Arabia's image and repair the diplomatic damage caused by the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul on 2 October 2018, Mohammed bin Salman massively intensified the kingdom's global public relations offensive. The aim was to present an image of the country as striving for reform, to deescalate mounting international political pressure, and to continue to attract foreign investment and make the kingdom a leisure tourism destination in line with the goals of Vision 2030.

In January the Saudi Public Investment Fund, which has more than \$300bn in assets and is chaired and managed by Mohammed bin Salman, signed a [\\$120,000-a-month contract](#) with New York PR firm KARV Communications, according to documents filed with the US Justice Department. The firm was tasked with enhancing the reputation and image of the Public Investment Fund and dissociating it from the kingdom's political leadership, as well as building trust and improving relations with key international stakeholders such as business leaders and the media. The KARV contract is only one of many deals the Saudi authorities have with global PR companies. Some firms cut ties with Saudi entities after Khashoggi's murder, but others continue to accept large payments to promote a positive image of the kingdom.

Cosmetic changes to the male guardianship system

In the summer of 2019, the Saudi government announced that it was about to make concessions and lift some of the restrictions women face under the country's oppressive male guardianship system, which basically treats women as legal minors and lets male family members take decisions about the course of their lives. [Royal decree M/134](#), issued by King Salman on 30 July 2019, allowed women for the first time to apply for their own passports and travel without needing permission from their male guardians. Other changes included women now being entitled to register and obtain family documents, and mothers having the possibility to be the legal guardians of their children.

While these as well as previous measures to relax strict gender segregation in public and allow women to drive are steps in the right direction, it remains unclear how these new regulations will be implemented, and how many women will truly benefit from them. What is certain, however, contrary to the impression given in the Saudi press and spread on social media, is that the male guardianship system has not been dismantled: it continues to negatively affect all aspects of women's lives and severely restricts their fundamental liberties.

The male guardianship system, which is neither based on Islamic law nor on the customs and traditions of Saudi society, continues to be imposed by the Saudi authorities in order to control women. Women cannot freely decide about their education, employment, health or who they want to marry. In addition, Saudi women cannot pass their nationality on to their children and, in the absence of laws to protect women from domestic violence, many remain trapped in abusive relationships. Of course, practices vary from city to city and from one institution or family to another, but the women who suffer most are those who have abusive guardians and find that the authorities support whatever brutal or violent treatment they are subjected to.

It is no coincidence that the Saudi authorities have felt the need to introduce these measures to grant women more rights at a time of increased international scrutiny of women's status in Saudi Arabia. In 2019 several young women, including Rahaf al-Qunun and two pairs of sisters, Dua and Dalal al-Showaiki and Maha and Wafa al-Subaie, fled the country and made public pleas for help in seeking asylum from their families and the Saudi government.

Meanwhile the very women who advocated for women's right to drive and for the male guardianship system to be abolished continue to be detained (in the cases of Loujain al-Hathloul, Samar Badawi, Nassima al-Sadah and Nouf Abdulaziz), or charged with criminal offences while temporarily released (Aziza al-Yousef, Eman al-Nafjan, Amal al-Harbi, Hatoun al-Fassi, Mayssa al-Manea, Ruqiya al-Muhareb, Shadan al-Onezi, Mayaa al-Zahrani and Abeer Naman-kani), having already been tortured and in some cases sexually assaulted for speaking out.

“Sportswashing”, entertainment and tourism

Another part of the PR strategy adopted by the Saudi authorities to distract from and gloss over its poor rights record is to invest heavily in the sports and entertainment sectors. Saudi Arabia made sports a priority in 2016 as part of Mohammed bin Salman's Vision 2030 economic development programme. Saudi Arabia's General Sports Authority [announced](#) a \$650 million investment to

develop local teams and athletes and to attract international sports events. Saudi diplomats entered into talks with the American National Basketball Association, Major League Soccer, World Surf League and Formula One auto racing to discuss bringing international sports to the kingdom.

The kingdom staged some of its first high profile sports events in 2019, including two major wrestling events, the Formula E all-electric car road race, the Italian soccer Super Cup and an international heavyweight boxing match. Many of the events being discussed are not one-offs but part of multiyear business deals with Saudi Arabia's General Sports Authority. The Dakar Rally, the Spanish soccer Super Cup, a Ladies European Gulf tournament and the debut of the Saudi Cup, a \$20 million horse race, are just some of the events scheduled for 2020.

Besides attempts to rehabilitate its image through “sportswashing”, the Saudi authorities have also invested in entertainment by bringing world-famous musicians such as Mariah Carey and David Guetta to play concerts in Saudi Arabia, or actors like Jean-Claude Van Damme and Bruce Lee to attend an entertainment industry event called Joy Forum 19. Many stars however faced a backlash for performing in the kingdom amid accusations that they were whitewashing a repressive government. Some entertainers even cancelled their appearances, such as Nicki Minaj, who stated that she wanted to show support for women's rights, gay rights and freedom of expression.

These women's right activists should not be imprisoned for their activism.

Will #DakarInSaudi participants take a stand and speak out?

#StandWithSaudiHeroes



**The Dakar Rally is coming to Saudi Arabia.
Don't let it "SportsWash" human rights abuses.**

**Speak up and
#StandWithSaudiHeroes**

Furthermore, in a historic first Saudi Arabia launched the “Where in the World” tourism campaign, using breathtaking drone footage of landscapes and heritage sites in an attempt to attract Western tourists to the kingdom. While historically visas for travel to Saudi Arabia have been issued only to those travelling for religious purposes, in 2019 Saudi Arabia announced a new e-visa scheme for leisure tourism. The authorities also invited social media influencers to the country on all-expenses-paid supervised trips, taking them scuba diving and desert trekking and putting them up in the country’s most luxurious hotels, so they could act as global marketing agents to help the kingdom further burnish its image.

Business as usual?

In 2018, shortly after the gruesome murder of Jamal Khashoggi, many business executives and international companies pulled out of the kingdom’s flagship annual investment summit, “Davos in the desert”. For many, the international outcry and possible reputational damage were too great, while others may rightly have asked themselves whether, in the absence of the rule of law and international scrutiny, doing business with the Saudi authorities was indeed a wise choice. Yet in 2019 many of those who had stayed away the previous year returned to the summit, signalling an alarming return to business as usual. Normalising business relationships with the kingdom means not only letting the authorities get away with murder but also turning a blind eye to a wide range of other serious human rights abuses, including enforced disappearances, arbitrary detention, torture, extrajudicial executions and the commission of war crimes in Yemen.

While the Saudi authorities pour seemingly endless amounts of cash into a large-scale PR offensive in pursuit of their Vision 2030 goals, i.e. economic development and diversification, and introduce superficial reforms to further whitewash their image, one should not forget that any genuine effort to reform or modernise the country would need to incorporate the ethical dimension of human development and a commitment to basic rights and freedoms.

11. ALQST'S International Awards Campaign

In 2018 ALQST launched a campaign calling on partner NGOs, national governments and human rights supporters all over the world to celebrate Saudi Arabia's human rights heroes by nominating them for prizes and awards and getting them talked about in international forums. This campaign saw many prizes awarded to Saudi activists during that year and was therefore continued into 2019 and beyond.



One of the first successes of the campaign came when Saudi human rights activist Waleed Abu al-Khair, who had previously won the Law Society of Upper Canada's Human Rights Award in 2017 and the 2015 Ludovic Trarieux International Human Rights Prize, as well as Sweden's Olof Palme Prize in 2012, was awarded PEN's International Writer of Courage Prize 2018. He, together with Saudi human rights

defenders Abdullah al-Hamid and Mohammed Fahad al-Qahtani, also won the Right Livelihood Award, often referred to as the Alternative Nobel Prize, "for their visionary and courageous efforts, guided by universal human rights principles, to reform the totalitarian political system in Saudi Arabia".

In January 2019 the Inti Raymi Fund, a global human rights foundation, started the Jamal Khashoggi Award ("JKA") for Courageous Journalism. It is meant to show people that journalists are not going to step aside, will not be silenced, and deserve to be recognised for their strength in the face of adversity, and to honour brave

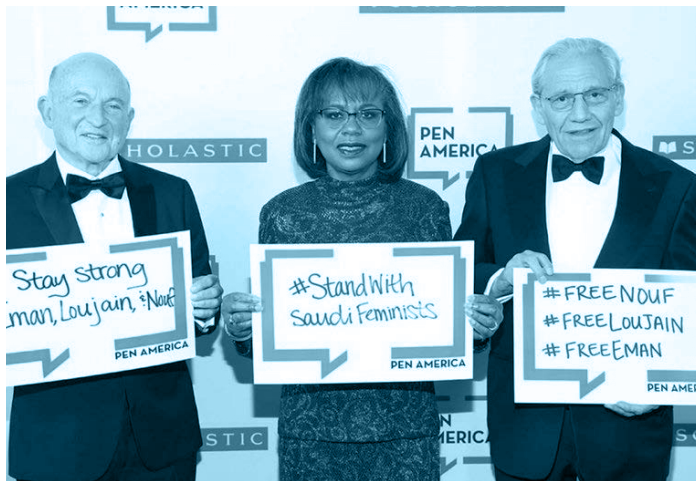
Jamal Khashoggi Award
for Courageous Journalism



journalists who expose abuse of power and corruption, share difficult truths, discuss taboo topics, and work in hostile environments.

On 3 April 2019 the first Amnesty International USA Press Freedom Award, recognising extraordinary courage and dedication to speaking truth to power through journalism, honoured the murdered Washington Post columnist Jamal Khashoggi.

On 17 April 2019 Loujan al-Hathloul was selected as one of Timemagazine's 100 most influential people of the year, for her long-term and fearless efforts demanding the right for women to drive as well as abolition of the male guardianship system.



On 21 May 2019 women's rights activists Loujain al-Hathloul, Eman al-Nafjan and Nouf Abdulaziz were given the [2019 PEN/Barbey Freedom to Write Award](#).

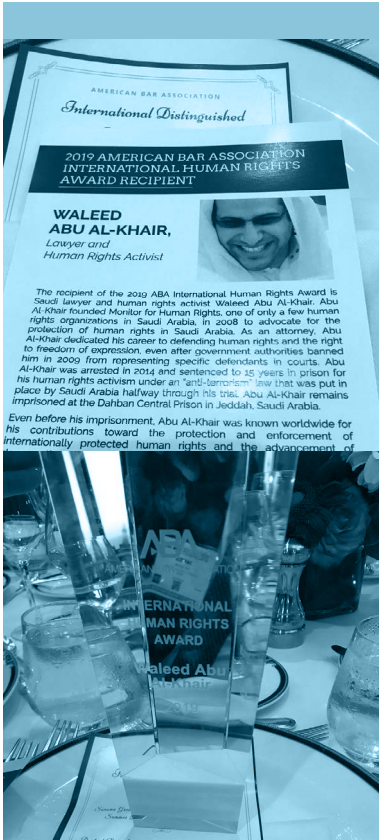
PEN America CEO Suzanne Nossel said: "We are proud to honour these drivers

of change for their fearless words and actions, and to send a strong signal that international pressure on the Saudi kingdom to respect dissent and adhere to international norms of free expression will not relent."



Saudi journalist Safa al-Ahmad speaks after accepting the Golden Pen of Freedom award in the name of fellow journalist Jamal Khashoggi

On 1 June 2019 the Annual Press Freedom Award of the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers was also awarded to Jamal Khashoggi. The award, called the Golden Pen of Freedom, recognised Khashoggi's long-standing commitment to speaking truth to power by exercising his right to freedom of expression through unflinching, quality journalism.



On 8 August 2019 Waleed Abu al-Khair received the American Bar Association’s Human Rights Award for “his work to advance human rights and advocate for justice in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia”.

On 12 September 2019 Eman al-Nafjan won the Rapporteurs Sans Frontières 2019 Prize for Courage for her brave activism for women’s rights in Saudi Arabia. The RSF Prize for Courage is given to journalists, media or NGOs who demonstrate courage in the practice, defence or promotion of journalism.



On 24 October 2019 Jamal Khashoggi was posthumously awarded the Oxi Courage Award by the Washington Oxi Day Foundation. The Oxi Day Award is given each year to an individual who has taken courageous action that contributed to the promotion or preservation of freedom and democracy.



On 24 October 2019 Jamal Khashoggi was awarded the Frontline Club Memorial Tribute Award for his integrity, courage and independence of spirit. The award is given annually to journalists in recognition of their outstanding body of work or achievements.



12. Conclusion and Recommendations

The year 2019 has not seen the improvements or genuine reforms we would have wished for, and the authorities have continued their crackdown on civil society. However, the murder of Jamal Khashoggi and the torture of women human rights activists have had a lasting effect on the standing and reputation of the Saudi authorities. They have attracted unprecedented international attention and condemnation of the human rights situation in Saudi Arabia: US Congressional action, a European Parliament resolution, two joint UN statements and the cutting of arms sales by several countries are just some of the positive international developments that have increased pressure on the Saudi government. This pressure has, moreover, led to some concessions, such as the temporary release of most of the detained women human rights defenders and the swift release of some other detainees, and the public prosecution dropping demands for the death penalty for certain prisoners, including Israa al-Ghomgham and Murtaja Qureiris.



Israa al-Ghomgham
(pictured here as a child)

Murtaja Qureiris

These small victories have clearly demonstrated that international pressure does have an impact and can bring about positive change in the human rights situation on the ground. Therefore, and especially given the absence of civic space inside the country, pressure on the Saudi government from the interna-

tional community is key, and needs to be not only maintained but increased. We at ALQST believe that combined pressure from international civil society, the state community and the business community will lead to real change in the future, and ultimately end the human rights violations committed by the Saudi authorities inside and outside Saudi Arabia. It is with this purpose in mind that we put forward the following recommendations.

Recommendations for the international community:

- Take action to ensure that an impartial, thorough, independent and effective criminal investigation is opened into the murder of Jamal Khashoggi, in which all perpetrators, including those at the head of the chain of command, are identified and prosecuted in a fair and transparent trial;
- Establish an immediate moratorium on all arms sales and exports of surveillance technology to Saudi Arabia;
- Consider the general human rights situation when engaging in business with the Saudi authorities, and assess the adverse human rights impact this might have;
- Introduce and endorse a UN resolution establishing a monitoring mechanism over the human rights situation in Saudi Arabia;
- Call into question and oppose Saudi Arabia's future membership of the UN Human Rights Council should the authorities fail to implement genuine reforms; and
- Urge the authorities in Saudi Arabia to implement the recommendations below.

Recommendations for the Saudi authorities:

- Ensure that the rights to freedom of expression, assembly and association are fully respected in law and practice and immediately and unconditionally release all prisoners of conscience, including women human rights defenders, who are being detained for exercising their fundamental freedoms;
- Ratify the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights;
- Reform the country's legal system by promulgating a constitution and a criminal code, and by revising the Law on Combating Crimes of Terrorism and its Financing, the Anti-Cybercrime Law, the Law on Printing and Publication and the Law on Associations and Foundations to bring them into full conformity with international standards;
- Put an end to the practice of arbitrary detention, and effectively afford individuals deprived of their liberty all fundamental legal safeguards and fair trial rights;
- Abolish the Specialised Criminal Court and refrain from subjecting peaceful dissidents to reprisals under the pretext of counterterrorism;
- Put an end to the practice of torture and ill-treatment, including prolonged periods of incommunicado detention and solitary confinement, and conduct prompt, effective and credible investigations into all allegations of torture, holding perpetrators accountable and providing victims with effective remedy in line with international standards;
- Immediately abolish the male guardianship system, repealing laws and ending practices that discriminate against women;

- Establish a moratorium on use of the death penalty with the aim of working towards its abolition; in the mean time, amend all existing legislation to limit application of the death penalty to the most serious crimes and prohibit the execution of minors;
- Put an end to all violations of international humanitarian and human rights law in Yemen, and ensure rapid and unimpeded delivery of humanitarian relief and essential goods;
- Put an end to the practice of enforced disappearance and ratify the UN Convention on the Protection of all Persons from Enforced Disappearance;
- Improve the management and oversight of prison facilities and ensure that the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners are upheld in all places of detention;
- Abolish the kafala system and ratify the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families as well as the ILO Convention No. 189 on Domestic Workers;
- Facilitate the naturalisation of stateless individuals and ratify the 1954 Convention Relating to the Status of Stateless Persons as well as the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.



13. Timeline of Human Rights-Related Events in 2019

2 January

British MPs request the right to visit eight female activists detained in [Saudi Arabia](#), following allegations that they have been subjected to ill treatment, including torture.

3 January

The first session of the trial in the Khashoggi murder case takes place.

8 January

Eighteen-year-old Saudi citizen Rahaf al-Qunun attempts to flee to Australia via Bangkok, where she is arrested. She later manages to secure asylum in Canada.

Reports emerge that Awadh al-Qarni has been in hospital since mid-December 2018, following a severe deterioration in his health resulting from medical neglect and psychological pressure.

9 January

Ruqiya al-Muhareb, Aziza al-Yousef and Eman al-Nafjan are transferred to Al-Ha'ir political prison after months in solitary confinement.

10 January



Zuhair Kutbi

Journalist and prisoner of conscience

Writer and journalist Zuhair Kutbi is re-arrested. He is seriously unwell and needs close medical care.

13 January

The trial of activist Israa al-Ghomgham, along with five other human rights defenders, begins in the Specialised Criminal Court (SCC) with the prosecution calling for her to be sentenced to death.

14 January

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo visits Saudi Arabia as part of a Middle East tour.

15 January

Comedian Abdulaziz al-Hazmi is released from prison, three months after his sentence expired. Al-Hazmi was sentenced in June 2018 on charges of tweeting in solidarity with political prisoners in Saudi Arabia.



Ahmed al-Amari

20 January

Ahmed al-Amari passes away after a deterioration in his health following five months' detention in Dhahban Prison, and possibly torture.

24 January

UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions Agnès Callamard announces that she will conduct an inquiry into the death of Jamal Khashoggi.

31 January

The Saudi authorities confirm in a public statement that they will not seek imposition of the death penalty on Israa al-Ghomgham.

5 February

A Canadian member of parliament nominates woman human rights defender (WHRD) Loujain al-Hathloul for the Nobel Peace Prize 2019.

7 February

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights announces that the initial findings of Callamard's report show that "Jamal Khashoggi was the victim of a brutal and premeditated killing, planned and perpetrated by officials of the State of Saudi Arabia".

US intelligence reveals that Mohammed bin Salman told an aide in 2017 he would use "a bullet" on Jamal Khashoggi.

14 February

The European Parliament passes a resolution condemning the torture and arrest of Saudi WHRDs.

22 February

Jordanian journalist Abdulrahman Farhana is arrested and disappears.

23 February

Saudi Arabia appoints its first female ambassador, Princess Reema bint Bandar al-Saud, as the kingdom's envoy to the US.

27 February

Saudi Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Adel al-Jubeir, pledges in Geneva to "cooperate with the UN mechanisms related to human rights, including the Human Rights Council".

February

Reports emerge that Saudi-American doctor Walid Fitaihi, held without charge in pre-trial detention since November 2017, has been subjected to torture at the Ritz Carlton Hotel as

well as in Al-Ha'ir and Dhahban Prisons.

4 March

The Saudi app Absher, which lets men track women under their guardianship, is cleared for sale by Google.

5 March

ALQST co-sponsors and takes part in HRC40 event “Saudi Arabia – Time for Accountability”, with panellists including UN Special Rapporteurs Fionnuala Ní Aoláin and Michel Forst.

7 March

Iceland leads a joint statement by 36 UN Member States calling on Saudi Arabia to improve its human rights record.

13 March

The first session of the WHRDs’ trial takes place and they are notified of the charges against them, which are mostly related to their peaceful human rights activism.

17 March

The New York Times reports that a year before Khashoggi’s murder Mohammed bin Salman approved a clandestine campaign against dissidents abroad that included surveillance, kidnapping, detention and torture.

19 March

A joint letter by US Senators calls on King Salman to release detained journalists, human rights defenders and women’s rights activists.

25 March

In the UK, five opposition parties call on the government to end arms sales to Saudi Arabia on the fourth anniversary of the Yemen war.

27 March

The second session of the WHRDs’ trial takes place, in which they lay out their defence and inform the judges of the abuse they have suffered in detention.

28 March

Aziza al-Yousef, Eman al-Nafjan and Ruqiya al-Muhareb are released temporarily while continuing to face trial.

Agnès Callamard says the secretive trial of those accused of killing Jamal Khashoggi does not comply with in-



Anas al-Mazrou

ternational fair trial standards. Law professor Anas al-Mazrou is arrested for criticising Saudi Arabia’s human rights record.

31 March

The Guardian reports on leaked

medical reports that show political prisoners in Saudi Arabia are suffering from malnutrition, cuts, bruises and burns.

3 April

The third session takes place in the trial of the WHRDs. Several more have been promised temporary release but it has not been granted.

5/4 April

At least 14 activists, writers and social media bloggers are arrested, apparently in connection with their links with the WHRDs, representing the first major wave of arrests since the murder of Jamal Khashoggi.

11 April

ALQST receives news that harmful pills and drugs are being circulated inside several Saudi prisons.

15 April

Today marks five years since human rights defender Waleed Abu al-Khair was arrested in 2014.

16 April

News emerges that two Saudi sisters, Maha and Wafa al-Subaie, have fled the country to Georgia and are seeking asylum.

17 April

US President Trump vetoes a resolution calling on the US to withdraw support for the Saudi-led war in Yemen.

Saudi women's rights activist Loujain al-Hathloul is selected as one of Time

magazine's 100 most influential people in 2019.

The fourth hearing in the trial of several WHRDs is postponed for unknown reasons.

18 April

Reporters Without Borders (RSF) ranks Saudi Arabia 172 out of 180 countries on its 2019 World Press Freedom Index, taking account of the murder of Jamal Khashoggi and the lack of accountability for it, and the rising number of journalists and citizen journalists in detention.

23 April

Thirty-seven Saudi nationals, mostly Shias from the Eastern Province, are executed for alleged terrorism-related offences.

29 April

The public prosecution demands the death penalty for Hassan Farhan al-Maliki.

2 May

In the fifth session of the WHRD trial, Hatoon al-Fassi, Amal al-Harbi, Maysaa al-Manea, Abeer Namankani and Shadan al-Onezi are temporarily released but still face trial.

Early May

Syrian pilgrim Khaled Abdulaziz, who was forcibly disappeared in September 2017, resurfaces in Al-Ha'ir political prison in Riyadh.

12 May

Today marks five years since the ar-

rest of Saudi journalist Alaa Brinji, who is serving a seven-year prison sentence for supporting human rights and expressing his opinions on social media.



Alaa Brinji

13 May

Yemeni journalist and writer Marwan Al Muraisy contacts his family for the first time after almost a year of being forcibly disappeared.

15 May

One year on from the wave of arrests targeting Saudi WHRDs, ALQST holds an event alongside Amnesty UK to discuss their cases and the state of human rights in Saudi Arabia.

Leading Saudi human rights activist Abdulaziz al-Shubaily and several other prisoners go on hunger strike in protest over ill-treatment.

18 May

Cleric and political activist Tawfiq al-Amer is released following the expiration of his sentence.

21 May

Abdulaziz al-Shubaily and fellow inmates end a five-day hunger strike having won concessions to their

demands and promises of improvements in their prison conditions.

Loujain al-Hathloul is honoured with the [2019 PEN/Barbey Freedom to Write Award](#).

23 May

A committee of the US House of Representatives advances a resolution condemning Saudi Arabia's imprisonment of 11 women's rights activists facing trial for political activism.

30 May

Human rights activist Essa al-Nukhafi's request to be transferred to Jizan Prison, so that his elderly mother can visit him, is refused.

7 June

Reports emerge that Saudi Arabia's youngest political prisoner, Murtaja Qureiris, is facing the death penalty after being held in pre-trial detention for almost four years. He is accused of crimes he allegedly committed at the age of 11.

12 June

Reports emerge that two Saudi women, sisters Dua and Dalal al-Showaiqi, have fled Saudi Arabia to Turkey and are seeking asylum.

17 June

UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions Agnès Callamard publishes the findings of her investigation into the killing of Jamal Khashoggi.

21 June

In a judicial review brought by Campaign Against Arms Trade (CAAT), the UK Court of Appeal finds that the UK government's decision to continue licensing exports of military equipment to Saudi Arabia is unlawful.

26 June

Forty human rights NGOs call for the establishment of a UN monitoring mechanism over the human rights situation in Saudi Arabia.

27 June

ALQST co-sponsors and participates in HRC41 event "Justice for Jamal" alongside UN Special Rapporteurs Agnès Callamard and David Kaye.

Saudi WHRD Samar Badawi appears in court over charges related to her human rights activism.

9 July



ALQST, in partnership with Diwan London, hosts an event on the steps needed to secure justice for Jamal Khashoggi. Speakers include Agnès Callamard, Khashoggi's fiancée Hatice Cengiz, and his editor at the Washington Post, Karen Attiah.

Rap star Nicki Minaj pulls out of a music festival in Jeddah, citing her support for the rights of women and the LGBT community and freedom of expression.

10 July

RSF visits Saudi Arabia to seek the release of 30 imprisoned journalists.

18 July

A UK parliamentary debate is held in Westminster Hall on the topic of "[Human rights in Saudi Arabia and the detention of opponents of the regime](#)".

24 July

President Trump vetoes three congressional resolutions aimed at blocking the US administration from selling billions of dollars' worth of weapons to Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

25 July

Mohamed al-Otaibi faces new charges including "fleeing justice", "going to Qatar", "communicating with foreign entities" and "interfering in public affairs".

28 July

A session of Salman al-Odah's trial in the SCC in Riyadh is postponed until October.

30 July

One year on since WHRDs Samar Badawi, Nassima al-Sadah and Amal al-Harbi were arrested, Badawi and al-Sadah are still in detention.

31 July

Today is the 30th birthday of detained human rights activist Loujain al-Hathloul.

1 August



Walid Fitaihi

Saudi-American doctor Walid Fitaihi is released on bail by the Saudi authorities after 20 months of arbitrary detention, but still faces trial on unspecified charges.

2 August

The Saudi authorities announce that adult women will now be allowed to travel without male permission and to have more control over family matters.

8 August

Human rights activist Essa al-Nukhaifi, already sentenced to six years in prison for his activism, faces new charges.

Waleed Abu al-Khair receives the American Bar Association's Human Rights Award.

13 August

Loujain al-Hathloul rejects an offer of release from prison in exchange for a video statement denying that

she was tortured in custody.

9 September

Two years on since a brutal crackdown in which the Saudi authorities arrested dozens of clerics, writers and activists, the vast majority are still imprisoned.

12 September

ALQST receives information about the politically motivated arrest of foreign residents of various Arab nationalities, as well as Saudi nationals who employ or sponsor them under the kafala system.

Eman al-Nafjan wins RSF's 2019 Prize for Courage for her brave activism for women's rights in Saudi Arabia.

19 September

ALQST co-sponsors and takes part in an HRC42 side event on arbitrary detention, enforced disappearances and the application of the death penalty in Saudi Arabia.

UN Assistant Secretary-General Andrew Gilmour presents his report on reprisals against individuals for cooperating with UN human rights mechanisms, including Loujain al-Hathloul, Samar Badawi, Mohammed al-Qahtani, Essa al-Nukhaifi, Fawzan al-Harbi and Yahya Assiri.

23 September

Australia leads a second joint statement during HRC42 expressing deep concern over the human rights situation in Saudi Arabia.

27 September

After 500 days in prison for WHRD Loujain al-Hathloul, 13 UN experts call in a joint statement for her immediate release.

28 September

Blogger Abdulaziz al-Odah is arrested.

2 October

A session of Salman al-Odah's trial, scheduled to take place in the SCC, and at which a verdict is expected, is postponed again to 10 October.

One year after the murder of Jamal Khashoggi, ALQST and 20 other NGOs issue a joint statement demanding "justice for Jamal". Various other events and vigils are held around the world to mark the anniversary.

10 October

The rescheduled sentencing hearing for Salman al-Odah is postponed again.

A session of Safar al-Hawali's trial takes place in the Specialised Criminal Court.

11 October

On the 10th anniversary of the establishment of the Saudi Association for Civil and Political Rights ([ACPRA](#)), ALQST and 13 other NGOs call on the authorities to release all detained ACPRA members.

16 October

A session is held in the new trial of

jailed human rights activist Mohamed al-Otaibi, to which international observers are denied access.

23 October

ALQST is officially admitted as a new member organisation of the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH).

28 October

ALQST receives information that London-based dissident Abdullah al-Ghamdi's mother Aida and younger brother Adel, who were arrested in March 2018, have been subjected to severe acts of torture.

6 November

American federal prosecutors accuse two former Twitter employees of spying on behalf of Saudi Arabia in order to gather sensitive information on Saudi dissidents.

16 November

ALQST, Diwan London, Muwatin, Salam for Democracy, Lancaster University and the Foreign Policy Centre organise a conference on the theme of "The Gulf States: An Aspired Future".



21-16 November

The Saudi authorities carry out a new wave of arrests of male and female journalists and activists in a continuation of their crackdown on civil society.

26 November

The authorities move Waleed Abu al-Khair to a high security unit, where he is held in solitary confinement for several days.

27 November

The sentencing hearing in Salman al-Odah's trial is postponed again, to 30 January 2020.

30-28 November

Due to significant international pressure and media coverage of their arrests, the Saudi authorities release Bader al-Rashed, Sulaiman al-Saikhan al-Nasser, Fuad al-Farhan, Wa'ad al-Muhaya, Musab Fuad, Abdulaziz al-Hais, Abdulrahman Alshehri and Abdulmajeed al-Buluwi.

10 December

On International Human Rights Day, ALQST holds its third annual conference, discussing current trends and ways forward with Saudi rights activists and panellists from RSF, English PEN, GCHR, FIDH, MENA Rights Group, ESOHR, Amnesty International and CAAT.

11 December

Waleed Abu al-Khair and Raif Badawi go on hunger strike after being transferred to a high security unit (for a second time, in Abu al-Khair's case)

and held in solitary confinement.

16 December

The third session of the new trial of activist Mohamed al-Otaibi is held.

A hearing takes place in the trial of Islamic researcher Hassan Farhan al-Maliki.

22 December

ALQST receives a written message, smuggled out of prison, from human rights defender Khaled al-Omair announcing the start of a hunger strike in protest over his unjustified detention.

23 December

Riyadh Criminal Court sentences five people to death and three others to prison for the brutal killing of Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul on 2 October 2018.

24 December

A new series of hearings begins in the case of Salman al-Odah.

29 and 31 December

Further sessions take place in the trial of Salman al-Odah, but no date is announced for the next hearing.

