



Input submitted to
the United Nations
Independent
Expert on the
enjoyment of all
human rights by
older persons

April 2025





ALQST for Human Rights is an independent NGO founded in 2014 by Saudi human rights defender Yahya Assiri to promote and defend human rights in Saudi Arabia. Named after the Arabic word for “justice”, ALQST takes a consistent approach grounded in international human rights law. We conduct on-the-ground research, engage in international legal and public advocacy, and campaign on behalf of victims of human rights abuses — defending rights for all, without discrimination.



1. Introduction

This input is submitted by ALQST to the UN Independent Expert on the enjoyment of all human rights by older persons, following a call for input ahead of the UN Expert's country visit to Saudi Arabia, scheduled from 20 to 30 April 2025.

We welcome this visit and the opportunity to contribute – both to inform findings on a vital issue and because such visits to Saudi Arabia are rare. Saudi authorities have repeatedly denied UN experts access, with many requests still pending. This likely reflects a desire to avoid scrutiny, as shown by the banning of public representation, silencing of civil society, and criminalisation of human rights work. Such lack of accountability and transparency undermines fundamental rights and governance as a whole. When concerns are raised by international observers, Saudi authorities often seek to spin the narrative by highlighting praise and downplaying criticism.

The enjoyment of human rights by older persons in Saudi Arabia is closely tied to the country's broader rights situation, where abuses remain systemic and widespread. Our input focuses on several areas in which older persons are particularly affected: arbitrary detention and inhumane treatment; travel bans; forced displacement; and barriers faced by older persons from marginalised groups. We conclude with recommendations for both the UN expert and the Saudi authorities.

2. Legal background

Saudi Arabia has no formal constitution, only a Basic Law of Governance that fails to embody fundamental rights and freedoms. Moreover, the kingdom does not have a penal code but instead leaves legal interpretation to the discretion of judges. A Penal Code of Discretionary Sanctions was due to come into force in 2022 and set to be the country's first written penal code to cover crimes for which there are no Sharia-specified punishments, but has still not been passed.

On 6 January 2022, Saudi Arabia issued the Elderly Rights and Care Law, the first law dedicated to the rights and care of older persons in the country. Among the provisions offered are state support if family care is unavailable, the right to live with and receive care from family members, and prioritised access to services like healthcare. The real impact of the new law now rests on the degree of implementation and enforcement, which historically has been poor.

3. Key Concerns

3.1 Arbitrary Detention of Older Persons

Since Mohammed bin Salman came to power in 2017, the authorities have further centralised state power and implemented sweeping waves of arbitrary arrests, unfair trials and lengthy prison sentences against activists, advocates for reform, and people simply voicing their opinions which do not follow the strictly imposed governmental lines.

The repressive tactics employed by the Saudi authorities have targeted a wide range of individuals and groups across the country, from different professions, backgrounds, and indeed ages. As such, there are many older persons who have been detained for exercising their fundamental rights, including human rights defenders whose activism stretches back decades, established academics and religious clerics, and ordinary retired citizens. With many individuals handed extremely lengthy prison terms, some reach older age while in jail.

Here is a selective list of older individuals who are currently arbitrarily imprisoned for exercising their fundamental rights: **Aida al-Ghamdi**¹ (aged 66 at the time of this submission); Egyptian Nubians **Farajallah Ahmed Yousef**² (66) and **Adel Sayed Ibrahim Fakir**³ (67); journalist **Abdelrahman Farhaneh**⁴ (67-68); cleric **Salman al-Odah**⁵ (68); cleric **Awadh al-Qarni**⁶

1ALQST for Human Rights, Aida al-Ghamdi, Political Prisoners Database
<https://www.alqst.org/en/politicalprisoners/aida-al-ghamdi>

2ALQST for Human Rights, Farajallah Ahmed Yousef, Political Prisoners Database
<https://alqst.org/en/politicalprisoners/Farajallah-Ahmed-Yousef>

3ALQST for Human Rights, Adel Sayed Ibrahim Fakir, Political Prisoners Database
<https://alqst.org/en/politicalprisoners/adel-sayed-ibrahim-fakir>

(68); psychiatrist **Sabri Shalabil**⁷ (68); academic **Ibrahim al-Faris** (68-69); **Zuhair Kutbi**⁸ (71-72); cleric **Hussain Al-Radhi**⁹ (74-75); cleric **Safar al-Hawali** (74-75); and retired architect **Ahmed Farid Mustafa**¹⁰ (85-86).

There are others who are due to enter older age in prison as they are serving lengthy terms, including: Huweitat tribe member **Abdel Nasser Ahmad al-Huwaiti**¹¹ 53, serving a 27-year prison term); retired teacher **Mohammed al-Ghamdi**¹² (55, 20 years); Egyptian Nubians **Abdulsalam Gomaa Ali Bahr** (aged 59, 13 years) and **Sayyed Hashem Shater** (61, 14 years); cleric **Mohammad al-Habib**¹³ (60, 12 years); academic **Saud al-Hashimi**¹⁴ (62-63, 30 years); and cleric **Ali Badahdah** (63-64, nine years).

4MENA Rights Group, Jordanian journalist Abdelrahman Farhaneh detained in Saudi Arabia since February 2019 (last updated 2022)

<https://menarights.org/en/caseprofile/jordanian-journalist-abdelrahman-farhaneh-disappeared-february-2019-arrest-saudi-arabia>

5DAWN, "Expressing Cynicism about the Government's Achievements": KSA Imprisons Salman Alodah, a Popular Scholar Advocating for Reform (2020)

<https://dawnmena.org/expressing-cynicism-about-the-governments-achievements-ksa-imprisons-salman-alodah-a-popular-scholar-advocating-for-reform/>

6ALQST for Human Rights, Awadh al-Qarni, Political Prisoners Database

<https://www.alqst.org/en/politicalprisoners/awadh-al-qarni>

7Human Rights Watch, Saudi Arabia: Psychiatrist Jailed after Salary Dispute (2023)

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/08/03/saudi-arabia-psychiatrist-jailed-after-salary-dispute>

8ALQST for Human Rights, Zuhair Kutbi, Political Prisoners Database

<https://alqst.org/en/politicalprisoners/zuhair-kutbi>

9ALQST for Human Rights, Hussain Al-Radhi, Political Prisoners Database

<https://alqst.org/en/politicalprisoners/hussain-al-radhi>

10ALQST for Human Rights, Ahmed Farid Mustafa, Political Prisoners Database

<https://alqst.org/en/politicalprisoners/Ahmed-Farid-Mustafa>

11ALQST for Human Rights, Abdel Nasser Ahmad al-Huwaiti, Political Prisoners Database

<https://alqst.org/en/politicalprisoners/abdelnasser-ahmad-al-huwaiti>

12ALQST for Human Rights, Mohammed al-Ghamdi, Political Prisoners Database

<https://alqst.org/en/politicalprisoners/mohammed-al-ghamidi>

13ALQST for Human Rights, Mohammad al-Habib, Political Prisoners Database

<https://alqst.org/en/politicalprisoners/mohammad-al-habib>

14ALQST for Human Rights, Saud al-Hashimi, Political Prisoners Database

<https://alqst.org/en/politicalprisoners/saud-al-hashimi>

Ill-treatment and medical neglect adversely impacting older detainees

Conditions in Saudi Arabia's harsh prison system, of which no independent monitoring is permitted, are notoriously poor for all inmates¹⁵. Prisoners of conscience, however, often also face cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment behind bars. The Saudi authorities routinely place the lives of targeted prisoners at risk through reckless negligence, wilful ill-treatment, enforced disappearance and deliberate medical neglect. Detainees have also been subjected to severe physical and psychological torture¹⁶.

Such ill-treatment of prisoners often has a disproportionately adverse impact on older prisoners, especially relating to their health, exacerbating existing health conditions and creating new ones.

Since his arrest in September 2017, preacher **Salman al-Odah** (68) has been treated extremely harshly in detention, including facing severe medical neglect. As a result, he has lost much of his eyesight and hearing. He remains in detention in Al-Ha'ir Prison in Riyadh, facing prolonged trial, and is regularly deprived of contact with the outside world.

Egyptian Nubians **Farajallah Ahmed Yousef** (66) and **Adel Sayed Ibrahim Fakir** (67) both suffer from chronic diseases and need regular medical treatment. They remain imprisoned in Abha Prison, Asir, with only occasional contact allowed with family members.

15ALQST for Human Rights, Shrouded in Secrecy: Prisons and Detention Centres in Saudi Arabia (2021)
<https://www.alqst.org/en/post/shrouded-in-secrecy-prisons-and-detention-centres-in-saudi-arabia>

16ALQST for Human Rights, Torture in Saudi Arabia - Impunity Reigns (2021)
<https://www.alqst.org/en/post/Torture-in-Saudi-Arabia-Impunity-Reigns>

Leading Palestinian official and long-term resident of Saudi Arabia **Mohammed Al-Khudari**¹⁷ (86-87) was denied essential medical treatment while in detention. He was undergoing post-operative cancer treatment at the time of his arbitrary arrest in April 2019, and his condition worsened drastically due to long gaps without any treatment while in prison. He was finally released in October 2022.

Deaths of older persons in detention

Such treatment has led to a number of deaths in detention in recent years, resulting from the deliberate denial of medical treatment, administrative neglect or torture.

Iconic human rights defender **Abdullah al-Hamid**¹⁸ died in detention in April 2020 at the age of 69, after the Saudi authorities repeatedly refused him medical treatment that he urgently required. He had been in a critical state of health in prison for many months, suffering from a cardiovascular disease for which doctors told him that he needed urgent heart surgery. The authorities ignored this medical opinion and said he would undergo the operation after three months; he soon suffered a cerebral stroke and died.

In another grave example, cleric **Ahmed al-Amari al-Zahrani**¹⁹ (69) died of a brain haemorrhage after being tortured in Dhahban Prison, Jeddah.

The authorities have also failed to protect prisoners from potentially violent fellow-inmates. The worst example we have seen to date was the apparently

17ALQST for Human Rights, Mohammed Al-Khudari, Political Prisoners Database
<https://alqst.org/en/politicalprisoners/mohammed-al-khudari>

18ALQST for Human Rights, Abdullah al-Hamid, Political Prisoners Database
<https://www.alqst.org/en/politicalprisoners/abdullah-al-hamid>

19ALQST for Human Rights, Ahmed al-Amari al-Zahrani, Political Prisoners Database
<https://www.alqst.org/en/prisonersofconscience/Ahmed-al-Amari-al-Zahrani>

contrived murder in October 2021 of political reformer **Musa al-Qarni**²⁰, who was brutally killed at the age of 67 in his prison cell by religious extremists, despite having repeatedly complained to the prison administration about the risks he faced.

The Saudi authorities have failed to effectively investigate these deaths.

3.2 Travel Bans Imposed Older on Persons

Prisoners of conscience who are released, including older individuals, usually continue to face strict conditions that routinely include arbitrary bans on travel, work and social media activity. The authorities also impose “unofficial” travel bans not based on any judicial ruling or ministerial order, as well as arbitrary travel bans on detainees’ family members, in a form of collective punishment.

Such travel bans have serious consequences for the victims’ lives, and can have especially adverse impact on older persons, including by preventing them from accessing specialist healthcare abroad, or visiting and reuniting with family members and loved ones outside the country. This can have a profound impact on the physical, mental and emotional well-being of both the individuals directly affected and their families.

Examples of older individuals who continue to face court-imposed travel bans upon being released from arbitrary detention include: academic **Abdul Rahman al-Shumayri**²¹ (75-76, facing a 15-year travel ban); **Saad Ibrahim al-Madhi**²² (75, 16 years); and lawyer **Sulaiman al-Rashudi**²³ (87-88, 15 years).

20ALQST for Human Rights, Musa al-Qarni, Political Prisoners Database
<https://www.alqst.org/en/politicalprisoners/musa-al-qarni>

21ALQST for Human Rights, Abdul Rahman al-Shumayri, Political Prisoners Database
<https://www.alqst.org/en/politicalprisoners/abdul-rahman-al-shumayri>

Other individuals face court-imposed travel bans that are due to extend into their older age, including: human rights defender **Abdulrahman al-Hamid**²⁴ (62-63, facing a nine-year travel ban; human rights defender **Mohammed al-Qahtani**²⁵ (59-60, 10 years); and human rights defender **Abdulkarim al-Khodr**²⁶ (58-59, 10 years).

Meanwhile other released prisoners of conscience of older age continue to face harsh restrictions on their activity, including: women's rights activists **Aziza al-Yousef**²⁷ (67-68) and **Aisha al-Mana**²⁸ (76-77) and lawyer **Ibrahim al-Mudaimeegh**²⁹ (82-83).

3.3 Forced Displacement and Its Impact on Older Persons

Arbitrary land seizures and forced displacement are longstanding practices of the Saudi authorities, and have accelerated in recent years. In the course of their unlawful acquisition of land and properties, often on

22ALQST for Human Rights, Saad Ibrahim al-Madhi, Political Prisoners Database
<https://www.alqst.org/en/politicalprisoners/Saad-al-Madhi>

23ALQST for Human Rights, Sulaiman al-Rashudi, Political Prisoners Database
<https://www.alqst.org/en/politicalprisoners/sulaiman-al-rashudi>

24ALQST for Human Rights, Abdulrahman al-Hamid, Political Prisoners Database
<https://www.alqst.org/en/politicalprisoners/abdulrahman-al-hamid>

25ALQST for Human Rights, Mohammed al-Qahtani, Political Prisoners Database
<https://alqst.org/en/politicalprisoners/mohammed-al-qahtani>

26ALQST for Human Rights, Abdulkarim al-Khodr, Political Prisoners Database
<https://www.alqst.org/en/prisonersofconscience/abdulkarim-al-khodr>

27ALQST for Human Rights, Aziza al-Yousef, Political Prisoners Database
<https://www.alqst.org/en/politicalprisoners/aziza-al-yousef>

28ALQST for Human Rights, Aisha al-Mana, Political Prisoners Database
<https://alqst.org/en/politicalprisoners/aisha-al-mana>

29ALQST for Human Rights, Ibrahim al-Mudaimeegh, Political Prisoners Database
<https://www.alqst.org/en/politicalprisoners/ibrahim-al-mudaimeegh>

sites earmarked for state development projects, they routinely trample on residents' rights, including the right to adequate compensation or alternative housing. This adversely impacts the lives of many older persons, who face additional barriers and risks in forced displacement, including relating to mobility issues, the breakdown of family structures and social networks, and access to health and other essential services.

The most egregious example of this is where Saudi authorities have violated the rights of local inhabitants in order to clear land for the Neom megacity project in the Tabuk province. Despite claims that the area is “virgin land,” it has in fact been inhabited for centuries, primarily by the Huwaitat tribe's approximately 20,000 members. ALQST's research revealed that the Saudi authorities illegally dispossessed the region's inhabitants and forcibly evicted them from their homes³⁰. Scores of Huwaitis peacefully resisting the tribe's forcible displacement and speaking out against the injustices inflicted on them were arrested and tried under the kingdom's Counter-Terrorism Law; at least 15 have been given prison sentences ranging from 15 to 50 years, and five sentenced to death. Several of those arbitrarily detained are older persons, including **Ibrahim Sabah al-Amiri al-Huwaiti**, a man in his 70s, who was arrested in May 2023.

3.4 Barriers to the Realisation of Human Rights Among Older Persons of Marginalised Groups

Older persons in Saudi Arabia can face significant barriers to the realisation of their human rights, and economic, social, and cultural rights in particular. Although these rights are not explicitly denied based on age, older persons frequently experience compounded challenges due to their intersection with other marginalised identities. These intersecting factors can adversely and sometimes disproportionately affect the lives of many older people.

³⁰ALQST for Human Rights, *The Dark Side of Neom: Expropriation, expulsion and prosecution of the region's inhabitants* (2023)

Stateless persons

There is a large number number of stateless persons in Saudi Arabia (estimated between 70,000 and 250,000 individuals), known as “Bidoon” (meaning in Arabic “without”, i.e. without nationality), the main categories of which are descendants of nomadic tribes that used to migrate in the Arabian Peninsula, and the so-called ‘Mawalid’ born to families who came as pilgrims. Whatever the reasons for their statelessness, the Bidoon struggle and suffer hardship in every aspect of their lives, including education, health, work and family life.

Older stateless persons suffer adverse consequences. Stateless persons are not entitled to medical treatment, which brings particular risks for older persons. Furthermore, as a general rule, the Bidoon cannot work or earn an income, yet the government offers them no financial support or pensions.

Women

The oppressive male guardianship system that treats adult women as minors continues to blight the lives of women in Saudi Arabia well into old age, despite the well-publicised removal of certain restrictions in recent years. The Personal Status Law of 2022 was touted by the authorities as a major progressive reform, but has proved to affirm and codify many of the discriminatory features of the system, including relating to marriage, divorce, child custody and inheritance. Such discriminatory features severely disadvantage women economically, including in old age. They can also have serious negative impacts on the health of older women, including due to restrictions on women’s physical mobility³¹.

31Hala Aldosari, The Effect of Gender Norms on Women’s Health in Saudi Arabia, The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington (2017)
<https://agsiw.org/effect-gender-norms-womens-health-saudi-arabia/>

The law also contains legal loopholes that continue to allow discretionary interpretation. Crucially, “disobedience” by a woman towards her male guardian (father, husband, brother or even son) remains a crime, leaving her subject to the dictates of her guardian and vulnerable to domestic violence. Such unequal power dynamics have a profound impact on women’s lives, including older women.

Migrant workers

Despite limited reforms in recent years, Saudi Arabia's notorious *kafala* (sponsorship) system, an abusive recruitment framework that ties foreigners working in the kingdom to an individual resident who acts as his or her sponsor, remains substantially intact. As such, migrant workers, who make up approximately 80% of the private labour force in Saudi Arabia (10 million), are vulnerable to exploitation and suffer routine abuse.

Although the majority of migrant workers return to their home country before retiring, the violations suffered, such as wage theft and abusive work conditions, can leave a long-lasting economic and physical impact into their old age.

4. Recommendations

Recommendations for the UN Independent Expert on the enjoyment of all human rights by older persons:

- Address these cross-cutting concerns during the visit and in the final report, and request access to and specifically raise individual cases, including older persons arbitrarily imprisoned and under travel ban;
- Urge the authorities in Saudi Arabia to implement the recommendations below.

Recommendations for the Saudi government:

- 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 older persons, who are being detained for exercising their fundamental freedoms.
- Put an end to the practice of torture and ill-treatment, and conduct prompt, effective and transparent investigations into all allegations of torture, ill-treatment and deaths in custody, holding perpetrators accountable and providing victims with effective remedy in line with international standards;
- Immediately lift all remaining restrictions, especially travel bans, imposed on those who have been conditionally released from prison, including older persons, for exercising their rights to freedom of expression, assembly and association;

- Put an end to the practice of unlawful demolitions and forced displacement, and instead conduct consultations with residents and provide adequate prior notice and sufficient compensation for losses;
- 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;
- Immediately abolish the male guardianship system, repealing laws and ending practices that discriminate against women;
- Amend the Personal Status Law so that it fully safeguards the rights of women; and
- 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 ILO Convention No. 189 on Domestic Workers.



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