

Still Not Free: Human Rights in Saudi Arabia in 2025



ALQST Annual Report
January 2026



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.

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Introduction

Welcome to the 11th edition of ALQST's Annual Report, which reviews the state of human rights and key rights-related developments in Saudi Arabia over the past year, based on our extensive monitoring.

Taken together, the reports published since ALQST's establishment in 2014 trace Saudi Arabia's largely regressive human rights trajectory over the past decade. They document systemic and long-standing violations; the brutal crackdowns that followed the accession to power of King Salman and his son Mohammed bin Salman; the announcement of reforms amid intense international scrutiny, and revulsion over the assassination of journalist Jamal Khashoggi; and, as that scrutiny and revulsion faded amid shifting geopolitical priorities, the resurgence of repression and the failure to deliver genuine reform, contrary to the authorities' official narratives and carefully crafted public image.



ALQST has consistently welcomed genuine progress or concessions from the authorities when these occur. The early months of 2025 brought some positive developments, notably the release of scores of prisoners of conscience, albeit only after they had served lengthy and unjust sentences. However, as the title of this year's report, *Still Not Free*, reflects, such measures have done little to create real freedom or dispel the prevailing climate of fear throughout the country. The prisoners who were released remain under severe restrictions including travel bans; numerous prisoners of conscience continue to be held arbitrarily, or face fresh prosecution; executions have continued to soar, reaching a record high for the second consecutive year; and women and migrant workers still face entrenched discrimination, despite official claims to the contrary.

This year's report is a reminder that, even as Saudi Arabia increasingly makes international headlines for its expanding global influence, ambitious mega-projects, and role in hosting high-profile sporting events, the reality behind this glittering façade continues to be one in which many citizens and residents endure harsh repression and their basic rights are denied.

In today's challenging global context, marked by rising authoritarianism and sudden crises, and as Saudi Arabia's international role continues to grow, the struggle between right and wrong goes on. It is vital that those with the ability and platform to do so stand on the side of right and justice, amplifying the plight of courageous activists and marginalised voices inside Saudi Arabia.

We encourage you to read this Annual Report carefully and visit our website to learn how you, whether Saudi or non-Saudi, can support the struggle for human rights for all in Saudi Arabia.

Thank you.

Julia Legner, Executive Director of ALQST

Executive Summary

Saudi Arabia in the world: Saudi Arabia's renewed international standing after a brief period of isolation over human rights abuses, notably the 2018 murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, was highlighted by its selection to host peace talks on Ukraine in February 2025 despite Riyadh playing only a limited mediating role. Given Saudi Arabia's vast wealth, world leaders continued to prioritise material interests, pursuing closer political, economic and strategic ties while largely overlooking ongoing rights abuses. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia continued to build its influence through the soft power of sports and entertainment, while concerns mounted over megaprojects such as Neom amid rising costs and evidence of labour exploitation.

The **legal framework** in Saudi Arabia on the one hand lacks core legislation, which creates a legal vacuum, and on the other comprises vaguely formulated and restrictive laws such as the draconian Law on Combating Crimes of Terrorism and its Financing and the repressive Anti-Cybercrime Law and Law on Associations and Foundations. In the absence of a criminal code, the country leaves the legal definition of crimes and determination of their punishments to judges' discretionary interpretation. This not only allows for the prosecution of peaceful activists but also creates legal uncertainty and therefore has a chilling effect on all citizens and residents. Saudi Arabia has ratified a number of international conventions on aspects of human rights but largely fails to implement them.

2025 saw some **changes in the long-familiar pattern of arbitrary arrests, detention and unfair trials** of peaceful activists and ordinary Saudi citizens and residents, including a number of foreign nationals, by the Saudi authorities. The early part of the year brought the release of scores of prisoners of conscience, most of whom remained under travel bans and other harsh restrictions, yet many more remained in prison serving lengthy sentences, while some had their sentences extended or even had new sentences imposed. Sustained advocacy by human rights groups like ALQST resulted in the reduction of prison terms for some individuals. Meanwhile, the authorities continued to make arbitrary arrests and sentence peaceful individuals to lengthy prison terms.

Torture and other ill-treatment: For all of those trapped inside Saudi Arabia's harsh and opaque prison system conditions are notoriously poor and prisoners of conscience are often subjected to cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment. In 2025 we again saw the Saudi authorities subject targeted detainees to such treatment, including physical and psychological torture, solitary confinement, enforced disappearance and denial of medical care. Meanwhile, further testimonies emerged from prisoners recently released about such abuses in prison carried out in previous years.

Saudi Arabia's **escalating use of the death penalty** reached horrifying new levels in 2025. According to data from the official Saudi Press Agency, the authorities executed at least 356 people in 2025, including five women, easily surpassing the previous year's record total of 345 to set a grim new milestone for the kingdom. Apart from pauses during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan in March and from 10 November to 5 December, executions were carried out almost daily. In the absence of transparency – with no publicly accessible record of those executed, and with executions sometimes carried out in secret – the real figures may be even higher.

More than half of the officially reported executions were for non-lethal drug offences committed by foreign nationals; others were for loosely defined “terrorism” offences, which can include peaceful dissent, or for alleged crimes committed as minors. These applications of the death penalty, in clear violation of international human rights law, underscore the Saudi authorities’ disregard for the right to life and heighten fears for others at risk of imminent execution.

The Annual Report examines the **release of scores of prisoners of conscience** in 2025 under continuing restrictions on their freedom, such as arbitrary bans on work, social media and travel or electronic tagging, that have a severe impact on the victims and their families. Some had completed lengthy prison terms, while others were released partway through their sentences or before being sentenced at all. The reasons for this development are hard to fathom, but it does not appear to signal any softening of the authorities’ determination to clamp down on any perceived criticism, calls for reform, or activism in defence of human rights. Many other prisoners of conscience, meanwhile, remain arbitrarily imprisoned.

Arbitrary land seizures and forced displacement, longstanding practices of the Saudi authorities, have accelerated in recent years, most notably in connection with major development projects such as Neom and Jeddah Central, both of which are featured as tournament venues in Saudi Arabia’s 2034 World Cup plans. In 2025 there were further evictions and coercive pressures to make way for Neom, a megaproject now facing significant scaling down amid financial and technical concerns. Meanwhile, further evictions occurred in other parts of the country.

As domestic civic space has disappeared, and with activism increasingly taking place from exile, Saudi Arabia’s authorities have expanded their reach beyond the country’s borders in order to silence dissent abroad. This takes various forms, including requests for extradition, in-person and online harassment and surveillance, and reprisals against family members in Saudi Arabia. ALQST continued to document examples of such tactics during 2025 and, together with partner organisations, highlighted the trend in written evidence to the UK Parliament’s Joint Committee on Human Rights as part of the Select Committee’s inquiry into **transnational repression** worldwide.

While some restrictions on women have been lifted in recent years, **women in Saudi Arabia still faced systemic discrimination**, as the 2022 Personal Status Law, presented as a major reform, actually codified much of the oppressive male guardianship system and women human rights defenders and activists continue to face arrest and prosecution. It is deeply concerning that on 22 October 2025, on Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman’s recommendation, King Salman appointed as the new Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia Saleh al-Fawzan, an influential scholar with a record of making deeply misogynistic statements.

Despite limited reforms in recent years, Saudi Arabia’s notorious *kafala* (sponsorship) system remains largely intact, with **migrant workers continuing to face routine abuse** including wage theft, forced labour, and inadequate health and safety protections. The country’s growing dependence on migrant labour, particularly in the construction sector for “giga-projects” and infrastructure for the 2034 World Cup, significantly heightens the risks of large-scale exploitation and potential worker deaths.

The Annual Report concludes with a set of detailed **recommendations** for international stakeholders including businesses and governments and for the Saudi authorities.

Saudi Arabia in the World

Saudi Arabia's renewed international standing after a brief period of isolation over human rights abuses, notably the 2018 murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, was highlighted by its selection to host peace talks on Ukraine in February 2025 despite Riyadh playing only a limited mediating role. Given Saudi Arabia's vast wealth, world leaders continued to prioritise material interests, pursuing closer political, economic and strategic ties while largely overlooking ongoing rights abuses. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia continued to build its influence through the soft power of sports and entertainment, while concerns mounted over megaprojects such as Neom amid rising costs and evidence of labour exploitation.

Diplomatic sidelining of Saudi rights concerns

The world's willingness to set aside well-documented rights concerns and violations was epitomised by **United States** President Donald Trump's choice of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf for his first major international [trip](#) of his second term in office. Trump had staunchly defended the Saudi leadership during his first term, and this approach has remained a defining feature of his second term so far, aligning with a broader embrace of authoritarian leaders and open hostility towards international human rights norms. In November, Saudi Crown Prince and Prime Minister Mohammed bin Salman, de facto ruler of the kingdom, visited the United States for the first time since the murder of Khashoggi, marking the completion of his diplomatic rehabilitation. Ahead of the visit, human rights groups [urged](#) the Trump administration and US Congress to press the crown prince to end his government's rights violations and to release detained activists, writers, and journalists. Instead, however, Trump openly dismissed Mohammed bin Salman's role in the assassination, casually remarking that "[things happen](#)". This was not the assessment of the US intelligence community, which concluded in 2021 that the crown prince bore responsibility.



[The Trump administration is enabling and exploiting the Saudi regime's repression](#)
(by Yahya Assiri, in DAWN)

In the **United Kingdom**, hopes were further dashed that the Labour government might place greater emphasis on human rights than its predecessor in its relationship with Saudi Arabia. UK-Saudi relations continued to be dominated by a push for Saudi investment, exemplified by ongoing negotiations for a Free Trade Agreement with Saudi Arabia and the rest of the Gulf Cooperation Council. In October 2025, Chancellor Rachel Reeves led a [trade mission](#) to Saudi Arabia as part of efforts to secure the agreement. ALQST has joined other NGOs in [raising](#) concerns about the human rights implications of the proposed deal.

British parliamentarians took a more proactive role in addressing human rights concerns in Saudi Arabia. The UK Parliament's Joint Committee on Human Rights launched a Select Committee inquiry into transnational repression, to which FairSquare, ALQST, and the Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy (BIRD) submitted [written evidence](#). In May 2025 a cross-party group of UK

parliamentarians [wrote](#) to Foreign Secretary David Lammy urging the government to use all available diplomatic tools to address the cases of Saudi sisters Manahel and Maryam al-Otaibi, as well as other women subjected to arbitrary imprisonment and travel bans. In June, a group of British MPs tabled an Early Day Motion (EDM) on human rights in Saudi Arabia, calling on the UK government to actively raise urgent [human rights concerns](#) with Saudi authorities.



[Starmer's silence on human rights in Saudi Arabia speaks volumes](#)

(by Maryam Aldossari and Oaima Al Najjar, in Declassified)

The **European Union** (EU) has also been seeking closer ties with Saudi Arabia, and is in the process of negotiating bilateral [Strategic Partnership Agreements \(SPAs\)](#). On 17 November 2025 the EU and Saudi Arabia held their [fifth Human Rights Dialogue](#), in Brussels, with the EU expressing concerns about the sharp rise in executions in Saudi Arabia, and individual cases of concern.

Scrutiny of Saudi Arabia at the United Nations

Saudi Arabia has faced increased scrutiny in recent years at the United Nations, and in April 2025, a UN Independent Expert (on the enjoyment of all human rights by older persons) [conducted a country](#) visit to Saudi Arabia for the first time in several years; ALQST submitted [input](#) ahead of this visit. In addition, the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls has a potential visit to Saudi Arabia planned for 2026. Meanwhile, other UN Special Rapporteurs, including the Special Rapporteur on human rights defenders and the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, continued to issue press releases addressing individual cases and regressive human rights trends in the country. During the year, ALQST remained actively engaged with UN human rights mechanisms, attending several Human Rights Council sessions, co-organising private briefings and a side event, and delivering oral statements.

2034 FIFA Men's World Cup, and Saudi Arabia's increasing grip on world sport

Saudi Arabia continued in 2025 to build its influence on global sport in what is widely seen as a bid to enhance its image and extend its soft power worldwide. This has been particularly evident in football, culminating in the kingdom winning hosting rights to the 2034 FIFA Men's World Cup in the face of opposition from civil society groups and trade unions. In May, a group of leading lawyers submitted an [official complaint](#) to FIFA, alleging that the sport's governing body had failed to uphold its own human rights standards in awarding the 2034 World Cup to Saudi Arabia. The following month, trade unions from 36 countries filed a [complaint](#) with the International Labour Organisation over the treatment of migrant workers in the kingdom.

In December 2025, marking the anniversary of Saudi Arabia being awarded hosting rights for 2034, ALQST and a coalition of 14 human rights organisations, trade unions, fan groups and migrant worker representatives [issued](#) an urgent warning about escalating human rights risks linked to the tournament. In letters addressed to [FIFA President Gianni Infantino](#) and [heads of football associations \(FAs\)](#) around the world, they highlighted ongoing violations throughout 2025, including widespread abuses of migrant workers' rights on construction sites, and called on FIFA to take immediate, concrete action involving meaningful stakeholder consultation.

Much of Saudi Arabia's investment in sports is channeled through the Public Investment Fund (PIF), the country's sovereign wealth fund. Four years after the PIF's 2021 acquisition of Newcastle United Football Club in the UK, criticism of the deal, including the role of Newcastle City Council, persists. In February, ALQST organised a delegation to Newcastle to meet with council leaders and held a public [briefing](#).



[Council pressed to act over Saudi “sportswashing”](#)
(BBC)

The Saudi authorities have adopted a similar approach across a range of popular sports worldwide, including Formula 1, golf, tennis, boxing, and snooker. In tennis, Saudi Arabia, already the host of the WTA Finals and the Next Gen ATP Finals, is set to [host](#) a new ATP Masters 1000 tournament starting in 2028.

Riyadh Comedy Festival

From 26 September to 9 October 2025, an event called the Riyadh Comedy Festival, the first of its kind in the kingdom, took place in the Saudi capital. The dazzling event featured a lineup of internationally renowned stand-up comedians, many known for their boldly satirical material and reportedly earning hundreds of thousands of dollars for their performances. Human Rights Watch and other rights organisations [highlighted](#) the irony of holding a comedy festival in a country where authorities continue to suppress free speech and criticism in any form. Some comedians [declined](#) to participate or [spoke out](#) against Saudi Arabia's human rights abuses. Those who performed, however, including some who offered to [donate](#) part of their fee to human rights groups, refrained from using their platform to address these issues; artists' contracts were reported to have explicitly placed restrictions on content.



[What I want the comedians who went to Saudi Arabia to know](#)
(by Taha al-Hajji, in Foreign Policy)

Questions over Neom's viability come to a head

The Saudi kingdom continues to seek foreign investment to support ambitious economic plans including several massive projects financed by the PIF. Among these, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's flagship gigaproject, Neom in northwest Saudi Arabia, has attracted the most international scrutiny. Already facing reports of significant scaling back, concerns over the project peaked in 2025, with the feasibility of the entire initiative called into question when it emerged that the projected cost of Neom in northwest Saudi Arabia had soared from the original estimate of \$500 billion (£386 billion) to \$8.8 trillion (£6.8 trillion), amid falling global oil prices and a growing fiscal deficit. These practical and financial challenges come alongside longstanding human rights issues, including the displacement and prosecution of local residents, as well as the project's potentially devastating environmental impact.

In November, a *Financial Times* [investigation](#) based on more than 20 anonymous interviews, highlighted the project's unravelling, revealing engineers and executives struggling to realise the crown prince's grand, and ultimately unrealistic, ambitions amid a culture of fear and deference. In December, Saudi Arabia's finance minister appeared to signal that some of the country's more ambitious projects could be postponed or even cancelled, when he [stated](#) that the kingdom has "no ego" preventing it from doing so. Meanwhile, Saudi leaders seem to be shifting focus away from megaprojects toward areas such as logistics, minerals, religious tourism, artificial intelligence and data centres.



[The Line: Saudi Arabia scales back megacity plans as crown prince's ambitions falter](#)
(Middle East Eye)

Flawed Legal Framework

The absence of fundamental laws creates a legal vacuum

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

The kingdom's first codified Personal Status (or Family) Law was finally introduced in 2022, along with a Civil Transactions Law intended to regulate private law relationships in the absence of a civil code, and a Law of Evidence aiming to "eliminate discrepancies in courts". However, a Penal Code of Discretionary Sanctions, also 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, has still not been passed.

The Law on Combating Crimes of Terrorism and its Financing

The [Law on Combating Crimes of Terrorism and its Financing](#) (the Counter-Terrorism Law) defines terrorism in vague terms and does not require the use of violence in order for an act to be characterised 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". It also stipulates a punishment of five to 10 years in prison for anyone who "directly or indirectly" portrays the king or the crown prince "in a manner that brings religion or justice into disrepute". The Law is routinely used to criminalise acts that fall under the rights to freedom of opinion, expression, peaceful assembly and association.

Moreover, the Law fails to uphold due process guarantees. Articles 19 and 20 give 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 (SCC) 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.

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 (\$800,000).

The Law on Associations and Foundations

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

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](#)); and 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 Saudi authorities have 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 Saudi Arabia for its substantial lack of implementation and failure to meet its obligations as set out in the conventions.

The overall impact on Saudi citizens and residents

While the government fails to comply with its international human rights obligations, the existing legal framework in Saudi Arabia on the one hand lacks core legislation 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 and residents, who have reason to fear prosecution for everyday peaceful expression of opinions that could be retroactively construed as crimes.

Arbitrary Arrests, Detention and Unfair Trials

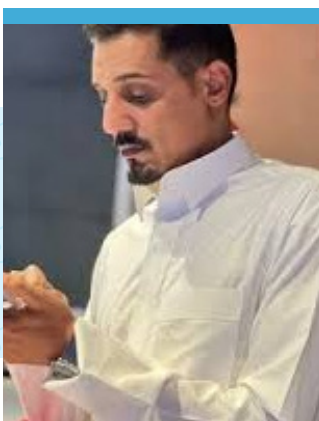
2025 saw some changes in the long-familiar pattern of arbitrary arrests, detention and unfair trials of peaceful activists and ordinary Saudi citizens and residents, including a number of foreign nationals, by the Saudi authorities. The early part of the year brought the release of scores of prisoners of conscience (but see “Prisoners Released Under Continuing Restrictions”), yet many more remained in prison serving lengthy sentences, while some had their sentences extended or even had new sentences imposed. Meanwhile, sustained advocacy by human rights groups like ALQST resulted in the reduction of prison terms for some individuals.

Arbitrary arrests in 2025

In January, brothers **Mohammed Abu Jabara** and **Daniel Abu Jabara**, both well-known religious singers, were arrested over the content of some of their work, before being released within a few days.

In February, the authorities arrested **Salmah al-Huwaiti**, mother of the detained child Abdullah al-Huwaiti, for previously posting on X about her son’s case and the conditions of his arrest (for more on Abdullah’s case, see “Use of the Death Penalty”, [page 24](#)).

And in November there were reports about the arrest of six Saudi citizens, including influencers **Fahad al-Ruwis** and **Falah al-Masredi** and lawyer **Sultan al-Atwi**, on charges of “publishing content that stirs public opinion”. This was in connection with their expression of support for a public boycott campaign targeting companies owned by the Al Rajhi family ([مقاطعة براندات الراجحي](#)), following recent social security cuts implemented by Minister of Human Resources and Social Development Ahmad Al Rajhi.



Fahad al-Ruwis



Falah al-Masredi



Sultan al-Atwi

The fact that there is so little confirmed or further information about such cases reflects the total lack of transparency around detention and judicial processes in the country as a whole, since the authorities block all means of accessing information, including independent monitoring of prisons or the courts. It also reflects the prevailing climate of fear in Saudi Arabia, where victims' friends and relatives are becoming ever more afraid of speaking out, and serves as a chilling reminder that the number of arbitrary arrests documented in the country, along with other human rights abuses, is likely to represent only a fraction of the total.

Retrials and new sentences

Throughout 2025 the Saudi courts, notorious for their abuses and disregard of legal safeguards, continued to hand down years-long prison sentences on peaceful activists and other harmless individuals.

In one egregious example, on 27 October Saudi Arabia's Specialised Criminal Court (SCC) [sentenced](#) veteran human rights defender **Mohammed al-Bejadi** to a further 25 years in prison. Al-Bejadi had already been held for more than two years beyond the expiry of his most recent sentence, yet instead of being released he was brought for retrial. ALQST is aware of scores of similar injustices.



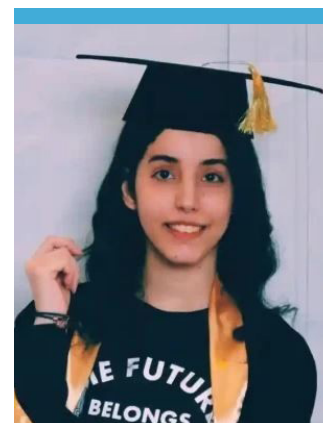
Mohammed al-Bejadi

A founding member in 2009 of the now-banned ACPRA, al-Bejadi has been arrested and imprisoned three times for his peaceful human rights activism. He was arrested for a second time in March 2011 and sentenced to ten years in prison, with five years to be served and the remaining five years suspended. He was released in April 2016 after completing the custodial term. However, on 24 May 2018 he was re-arrested during a crackdown on women's rights defenders and required to serve the remaining five years of the suspended sentence, which expired in April 2023.

Al-Bejadi's case is one of several in recent years in which Saudi authorities have continued to detain political prisoners beyond completion of their sentences, then retried them and extended their imprisonment. Besides inflicting further injustice on these people after years of arbitrary imprisonment, it creates fear in other prisoners who fail to be released on expiry of their sentences that they too may be retried. The UN Special Rapporteur on human rights defenders, Mary Lawlor, [highlighted](#) al-Bejadi's case in April 2025 to draw attention to this trend. Another prisoner of conscience in Saudi Arabia who remains arbitrarily detained after completing her sentence is journalist and writer **Maha al-Rafidi**, who was arrested in September 2019. Her six-year sentence expired in mid-2025, yet she continues to be detained and subjected to ill-treatment.

Another cruel example of the authorities retrying and resentencing political prisoners is the case of **Malek al-Dowaish**, resented early in 2025 to 15 years in prison, although his brothers Abdulwahhab and Abdulrahman al-Dowaish were released in June, after more than three years of detention, and many months after the expiry of their sentences. All three brothers have been arbitrarily targeted in reprisal for their efforts to discover their father Sulaiman al-Dowaish's whereabouts and secure his release (see "Torture and Other Ill-treatment" [page 20](#)).

Meanwhile, several prisoners of conscience who faced retrial were handed reduced sentences, a testament to advocacy efforts but still a far cry from what is needed: their immediate and unconditional release. On 21 August, the SCC overturned fitness instructor and women's rights activist **Manahel al-Otaibi**'s 11-year jail sentence, but handed her a new one of five years, to be followed by a five-year travel ban. Given the time she has already served, while facing repeated abuse (see "Torture and Other Ill-treatment" [page 20](#)), this will entail two more years of arbitrary imprisonment, until late 2027, on [charges](#) relating solely to her choice of clothing and expression of feminist views online. The conflict with official narratives about women's empowerment (see "Women's Rights", [page 45](#)) is obvious.



Manahel al-Otaibi

It was nevertheless significant that for the first time in several years the Saudi authorities granted several embassy officials who requested it access to al-Otaibi's trial hearing on 21 August. As her subsequent re-sentencing to five years in prison demonstrates, the presence of international observers does not alone guarantee a fair trial. Yet the right to a fair trial involves the right to a public and open hearing, and the lack of access for international observers adds a further layer of secrecy to judicial proceedings in Saudi Arabia that are already marred by violations.

Judicial proceedings and secret trials in Saudi Arabia

Judicial proceedings in Saudi Arabia routinely fall short of international standards and fair trial guarantees. Both the regular criminal courts and the Specialised Criminal Court , an exceptional jurisdiction set up in 2008 to try cases of terrorism, are notorious for their disregard of legal safeguards. Common violations include the denial of access to lawyers and court documents, undue delays, the regular admission of confessions coerced under torture, and the holding of trials in secret.

Since October 2018, Saudi Arabia's authorities have routinely held trial proceedings in secret, denying access to international observers, including embassy officials and foreign media, as well as the Saudi public.

On 6 September, the SCC likewise reduced the sentences of **10 Nubian Egyptians** who had been unjustly detained for over five years. The court had initially sentenced the men to prison terms ranging between 10 and 18 years on 10 October 2022. Their sentences now range from seven to nine years. [The ten](#), Egyptian nationals, were long-time residents in Saudi Arabia and active members of Nubian community associations in the country when arrested on 14 and 15 July 2020 for organising a peaceful event in Riyadh to mark the anniversary of the Arab-Israeli October War of 1973 in legitimate exercise of their rights to freedom of association and assembly. The ten remain incarcerated in Abha Prison, Asir, allowed only limited contact with their families.



Other foreign nationals have also fallen victim in recent times to the authorities' arbitrary repression. A French national was detained and ill-treated in prison in Saudi Arabia for more than a year before being brought to trial in the SCC in May 2025. Mr **Abdelfattah**, a father of three whose full name we are not disclosing for privacy reasons, was stopped by security officials on 16 June 2024 while taking part in the Hajj pilgrimage in Mecca, and was asked to show his Hajj permit. It transpired that his permit was invalid and he had unknowingly fallen victim to a visa scam, a common occurrence that the authorities are trying to crack down on. Abdelfattah was initially detained at the Haram police station and transferred the following day to Dhahban Prison near Jeddah. During his time in custody – now more than 18 months – he has been subjected several times to ill-treatment and torture by prison guards and security officers (see “Torture and Other Ill-treatment” [page 20](#)).

At the time of the incident, the [penalty for unauthorised Hajj pilgrims](#) was a fine of 10,000 Riyals (approximately 2,000 GBP) and deportation. Similar penalties were announced for the [2025 \(1446 AH\) Hajj season](#). Yet Abdelfattah was detained for more than 11 months before eventually being put on trial, in May 2025, on charges relating both to the visa issue – “illegal entry to Mecca” – and to peaceful free expression – “insulting the government” and “praising prosecuted individuals”. He denies the charges.

At the first hearing of his case in the SCC on 26 May 2025, Abdelfattah appeared without legal representation, and at subsequent hearings the court indicated that if he refused to defend himself (having been denied a lawyer) this would be taken as admission of guilt. Abdelfattah's family have not been allowed to attend the hearings, and neither have French diplomats.



[French man held in Saudi Arabia for over a year after Hajj scam](#)
(Middle East Eye)

A selective list of Saudi prisoners of conscience serving long jail sentences for exercising their fundamental rights (listed in ascending order of sentence length).

Name	Field of activity	Date of arrest	Prison sentence
Ali Mohsen Abu Lahoum	Journalist	23 August 2021	Five years
Manahel al-Otaibi	Fitness instructor and women's rights activist	16 November 2022	Five years
Maha al-Rafidi	Journalist and writer	28 September 2019	Six years
Adel Sayed Ibrahim Fakir	Head of the Nubian community in Riyadh	14 July 2020	Eight years
Khaled al-Omair	Human rights defender	29 June 2018	Nine years
Sabry Shalabi (Egyptian)	Doctor	28 January 2020	10 years
Khaled al-Mahoush	Writer	12 September 2017	10 years
Abdullah Jelan	University graduate	12 May 2021	10 years
Issa al-Hamid	Human rights defender	16 September 2017	11 years
Mohammed al-Habib	Cleric	16 November 2022	12 years
Israa al-Ghomgham	Human rights activist	December 2015	13 years
Mohammed al-Hudaif	Cleric	19 March 2016	13 years

Osama Khaled	Writer, translator and computer programmer	2020	14 years
Waleed Abu al-Khair	Human rights defender	15 April 2014	15 years
Essam al-Zamel	Economist	12 September 2017	15 years
Mohammed al-Wadani	Protester	4 March 2011	15 years
Malek al-Dowaish	Son of disappeared torture victim	July 2022	15 years
Mousa al-Hashim	Protester	6 December 2015	17 years
Mohammed al-Oteibi	Human rights defender	24 May 2017	17 years
Manal al-Gafiri	School student	2022	18 years
Abdelrahman Farhaneh (Jordanian)	Journalist	22 February 2019	19 years
Abdulrahman al-Sadhan	Humanitarian worker	12 March 2018	20 years
Mohammed Al Hazzaa al-Ghamdi	Political cartoonist	13 February 2018	23 years
Khidr al-Awami	Cleric	11 November 2020	25 years
Mohammed al-Bejadi	Human rights defender	24 May 2018	25 years
Abbas al-Saeed	Cleric	11 November 2020	27 years
Saud al-Hashim	Academic	2 February 2007	30 years
Amir al-Muhalhal	Cleric	2020	30 years

Mohammad bin Nasser al-Ghamdi	Retired teacher	11 June 2022	30 years
Nourah Saeed al-Qahtani	Mother and housewife	4 July 2021	35 years

Torture and Other Ill-treatment

For all of those trapped inside Saudi Arabia's harsh and opaque prison system, conditions are notoriously poor and prisoners of conscience are often subjected to cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment. In 2025 we again saw the Saudi authorities subject targeted detainees to such treatment, including physical and psychological torture, solitary confinement, enforced disappearance and denial of medical care. Meanwhile, further testimonies emerged from prisoners recently released about such abuses in prison carried out in previous years.

Physical and psychological torture

Torture has been practised systematically in Saudi Arabia amid a climate of impunity for years, both to extract confessions during interrogation and as a form of punishment during detention. Such confessions have been frequently used to hand out death sentences (see "Use of the Death Penalty", [page 24](#)). The continuing and almost routine use of enforced disappearance and incommunicado detention makes it likely that further instances of torture occur in secret.

French national Mr **Abdelfattah**, detained in Saudi Arabia since June 2024 (see "Arbitrary Arrests, Detention and Unfair Trials", [page 13](#)), faced repeated physical and psychological torture in detention, including beatings, being slammed against a wall, and death threats. As a result, he sustained injuries and suffered deterioration of his health, yet the authorities have denied him essential medical care (see "Denial of medical treatment" below).

Testimonies of similar treatment routinely emerge from former prisoners, including foreign nationals who can speak out more freely after leaving the country. A 40-year old **Luxembourgish national**, who wishes to remain anonymous for security reasons, was detained in Saudi Arabia without charge from November 2023 until September 2024. He suffered cruel treatment in detention, including being held in solitary confinement for several weeks.

Solitary confinement lasting more than 15 days is considered, by international standards, a violation of the absolute prohibition on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment, yet the Saudi authorities routinely subject prisoners to this abuse.

Nourah al-Qahtani, a 51-year-old mother of five children facing 35 years in prison for peaceful dissent, was placed in solitary confinement in February. Similarly, human rights activist and ACPRA member **Omar al-Saeed**, arbitrarily detained since June 2018, was [placed](#) in solitary confinement in October.



[Concern for Saudi woman held in solitary confinement since February](#)
(Middle East Eye)

Saudi Arabia has no legislation criminalising torture as mandated under its international obligations, and so perpetrators enjoy impunity as allegations go uninvestigated and coerced confessions are accepted by courts.

A history of failure in duty of care to protect prisoners of conscience

As well as directly subjecting prisoners to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment the authorities routinely place the lives of targeted prisoners at risk through reckless negligence, including knowingly placing them in cells and on wings where they may be at risk from other, potentially violent, prisoners, and failing to respond to repeated complaints. The worst example we have seen to date was the apparently contrived murder in October 2021 of political reformer **Musa al-Qarni**, who was brutally killed in his prison cell by religious extremists, despite having repeatedly complained to the prison administration about the risks he faced. Other recent examples include repeated attacks such as beatings and stabbings inflicted on fitness instructor **Manahel al-Otaibi**; the transfer of Islamic scholar **Ibrahim Mohammed Ha'il al-Yamani** to a cell shared with extremists who had threatened several times to kill him; an unexplained attempt to kill human rights defender Khaled al-Omair; and an assault on human rights defender **Mohammed al-Qahtani** by a man with mental health issues.

Incommunicado detention and enforced disappearance

Another common practice of the authorities is subjecting prisoners to incommunicado detention, whereby they are denied contact with the outside world, including with their families and lawyers. French national Mr Abdelfattah has been held incommunicado since 5 August 2025, unable to contact his wife and two children.

When the authorities hold someone incommunicado and also refuse to acknowledge the detainee's whereabouts and status, the case is considered an enforced disappearance, which remains a widespread practice in Saudi Arabia.

Longstanding cases of enforced disappearance

Saudi Arabia has not yet ratified the 1992 International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (ICPPED), but during the fourth Universal Periodic Review (UPR) in 2024, did accept a recommendation to ratify the treaty. This must now be acted upon promptly, given that the authorities systematically practise enforced disappearance – sometimes lasting many years – to silence activists and other critics.

Humanitarian worker **Abdulrahman al-Sadhan** was arrested by secret police in March 2018 from his workplace at the headquarters of the Saudi Red Crescent in Riyadh and forcibly disappeared for 23 months. He was sentenced in April 2021 to 20 years in jail for peaceful comments posted on Twitter, and since an appeal court appearance in August of that year has been forcibly disappeared again. The authorities have denied al-Sadhan any contact with his family for over four years.

While disappeared, individuals are at heightened risk of other human rights violations, such as torture, because they are outside the protection of the law. Preacher **Sulaiman al-Dowaish** has been forcibly disappeared since being arrested on 22 April 2016, after tweeting comments critical of King Salman and Prince Mohammed bin Salman, and being brutally tortured by high-ranking officials at an unofficial place of detention in Riyadh. The last reported sighting of al-Dowaish was in July 2018; since then there has been no news of him or his health or whereabouts.



Abdulrahman al-Sadhan, with his sister, Areej

Denial of medical treatment

The poor conditions in prison, and deplorable treatment of targeted prisoners of conscience, including denial of medical treatment, can endanger lives. Such treatment has led in recent years to a number of deaths in detention, such as that of iconic human rights defender **Abdullah al-Hamid** in April 2020, or deaths shortly after release from prison.

In May 2025, academic and writer **Walid al-Huwairini** died, only months after his release from prison, where he had faced almost seven years of arbitrary imprisonment. Also to die that same month was cleric and former detainee **Saad al-Breik**. Both men had been affiliated with former Interior Minister and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Nayef, who was deposed following the accession of the present crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman.

The systematic 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, 69-year-old preacher **Salman al-Odah** 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.



Salman al-Odah

Similarly, 61-year old cleric **Mohammad al-Habib**'s health has been deteriorating in Dammam Prison due to a lack of adequate health care for his sciatica and the severe back and head pain he suffers as a lingering result of torture following his arrest in 2016. The authorities continue to deny him essential medication.

Shrouded in secrecy: Saudi Arabia's prison system

The [Saudi prison system](#), in terms of structure and administration, lacks transparency and the benefits of independent monitoring. This increases the potential for serious violations of prisoners' rights, including unlawful arrest and detention, prolonged pre-trial detention, systematic use of torture during interrogation, medical neglect and malpractice, and failure to observe guarantees of due process.

No independent monitoring of prison conditions is currently permitted in Saudi Arabia, and the authorities refuse to cooperate with United Nations bodies, regularly denying country access to UN special procedures mandate holders. On one rare occasion, in April 2025, a UN Independent Expert on the enjoyment of all human rights by older persons was able to conduct a [country visit](#) to Saudi Arabia. Yet while the resulting report contained some valuable findings, the UN Expert was crucially denied a request to visit prisoners of conscience in Al-Ha'ir Prison. Given this, the mission's visit to the prison could offer only a stage-managed snapshot, noting the good facilities on offer but failing to meet arbitrarily detained prisoners facing severe medical neglect.

Meanwhile, the kingdom's official human rights body, the Saudi Human Rights Commission, has consistently failed to effectively address complaints of torture or ill-treatment within detention facilities it has visited, acting instead as a [whitewashing tool](#) for the authorities.



Use of the Death Penalty

Saudi Arabia's escalating use of the death penalty reached horrifying new levels in 2025. According to data from the official Saudi Press Agency, the authorities executed at least 356 people in 2025, including five women, easily surpassing the previous year's record total of 345 to set a grim new milestone for the kingdom. Apart from pauses during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan in March and from 10 November to 5 December, executions were carried out almost daily. In the absence of transparency – with no publicly accessible record of those executed, and with executions sometimes carried out in secret – the real figures may be even higher.

More than half of the officially reported executions were for non-lethal drug offences committed by foreign nationals; others were for loosely defined “terrorism” offences, which can include peaceful dissent, or for alleged crimes committed as minors. These applications of the death penalty, in clear violation of international human rights law, underscore the Saudi authorities' disregard for the right to life and heighten fears for others at risk of imminent execution.

Escalating executions for drug-related offences

Of the 356 individuals publicly reported as having been executed in 2025, 240 were executed for drug-related crimes. This continues a regressive trend that has intensified sharply since 2024: from two individuals executed for such crimes in the whole of 2023 to 122 in 2024, now almost doubling to 240 in 2025. A short-lived moratorium on executions for drug offences that lasted from January 2021 until November 2022 was never consolidated in an official change of policy and has since been comprehensively abandoned. All such executions are in clear violation of international human rights law, which prohibits the use of the death penalty for crimes that fall below the threshold of “the most serious crimes”, involving intentional killing. In particularly stark contrast with this rigorous criterion, more than 40 percent (100) of all executions for drug-related offences in 2025 were linked solely to the smuggling or possession of hashish, a cannabis product use of which is relatively lightly punished, or even decriminalised, in many parts of the world.

Foreign nationals accounted for the vast majority (187 out of 240) of drug-related executions in 2025, all of them from Asian and African countries: Somalia (39), Ethiopia (35), Pakistan (35), Egypt (22), Afghanistan (17), Jordan (11), Nigeria (10), Syria (7), Iran (6), Sudan (4) and India (1). Rights groups have confirmed, from court documents and testimonies, a [pattern of abuses](#) suffered in the course of their arrest, detention and trial. These include lack of access to consular support, legal representation, adequate interpretation and court documents. In many cases, foreign nationals do not receive any translation of the charges against them or are coerced into signing documents they cannot read, leaving them unable to mount an effective legal defence or appeal. Furthermore, some of the foreign nationals executed or currently on death row for drug-related offences are thought likely to have been victims of human trafficking, coerced or deceived into transporting illicit substances under threat or false pretences. However, most of them were not given the chance to plead their innocence in court.

Many remain at risk of imminent execution, living in a state of terror, including Ethiopians and Somalis in Najran Prison, southwestern Saudi Arabia, and Egyptians in Tabuk Prison, northwestern Saudi Arabia. UN experts including the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary

executions have repeatedly [called](#) on the Saudi authorities to immediately halt such executions and abolish the death penalty for drug-related offences.



[“I’ll be executed on Tuesday”: families reveal panicked last calls from foreigners on Saudi’s death row](#) (*The Guardian*)

Analysis: Why is Saudi Arabia executing so many people, especially foreign nationals, for drug-related offences?

Saudi Arabia has a long history of strict drug control laws and using the death penalty for drug-related offences. Foreign nationals have disproportionately borne the brunt of this policy; between 2010 to 2021 Saudi Arabia executed nearly three times as many foreign nationals for drug-related offences as Saudi nationals. Yet even by historical standards, the current surge in executions is dramatic.

Following a short-lived moratorium on executions for drugs-related offences between January 2021 and November 2022, executions have risen sharply. This increase has coincided with an intensifying [“war on drugs”](#) rhetoric and policy approach. In recent years, Saudi authorities and state media have repeatedly warned of rising drug use, with frequent reports of drug-related arrests. In April 2023 the Ministry of Interior launched a ferocious [anti-drug campaign](#) called “On the Lookout”, which granted security forces sweeping powers to crack down on suspected drug users, regardless of the quantities involved.

Saudi Arabia has long been a major drug trafficking route and drug use has become widespread in the country, amid shifting drug tracking routes in the region. Many drug-related cases in 2024 and 2025, for example, involved the smuggling of Captagon, a highly addictive amphetamine-type substance. Prior to its fall in December 2024, the Assad regime in Syria was notoriously the world’s prime producer and exporter of Captagon pills, with large quantities of the drug reaching neighbouring countries, including Saudi Arabia, where it has been causing far-reaching social problems.

While it is a legitimate objective for the Saudi authorities to try to curb drug trafficking and drug use, their response in resorting to the death penalty is not only unlawful under international human rights law, but discriminatory and ineffective. It tends to affect low-level actors, such as drug mules and/or victims of exploitation, rather than drug lords. As documented by human rights NGOs, those sentenced to death for drug-related offences are often arrested with small quantities of drugs, and subsequently coerced or tortured into confessions amid broader [patterns of abuses](#). Little progress has been made in dismantling criminal organisations themselves, allowing the cycle to persist.



The Saudi authorities are likely aware of these shortcomings, yet continue to justify the use of capital punishment for drug-related offences, without evidence, on the grounds of deterrence and the maintenance of public order, an approach that enjoys some level of support. The disproportionate impact on foreign nationals highlights both the intersecting disadvantages they face and the structural challenges within Saudi Arabia's criminal justice system. Many victims come from Asian and African countries that are economically dependent on Saudi Arabia and reluctant to exercise the limited diplomatic leverage available to them. Meanwhile, other countries have largely overlooked the issue until now.



Executions for “terrorism”-related offences

Furthermore, 45 men were executed in 2025 for “terrorism”-related offences, which, according to the vague and overly broad definition of terrorism in Saudi law, can include a wide range of non-lethal acts. In one such case, Saudi journalist **Turki al-Jasser** was [executed](#) on 14 June under a number of extremely broad and vague charges of “terrorist” crimes including “high treason”. Despite the lack of any further details regarding al-Jasser’s execution – typical of the absence of transparency in Saudi Arabia – his case bears all the hallmarks of a pattern whereby the authorities conflate peaceful dissent with terrorism.



Turki al-Jasser

A journalist with *Al-Taqrir* newspaper, al-Jasser tackled sensitive topics including women’s rights, corruption, and the plight of the Palestinians. He was arrested in March 2018 and for the vast majority of time since was subjected to enforced disappearance, denied any contact with the outside world. His execution, which dramatically illustrates the lengths to which the Saudi authorities will go to suppress peaceful dissent, took place suddenly; neither rights groups nor even his family were aware that he was on death row. This reinforces long-standing concerns raised by NGOs that the true number of individuals at risk of execution—and the overall scale of human rights abuses in Saudi Arabia—is likely far greater than what is publicly known or monitored.



[A Saudi journalist tweeted against the government – and was executed for “high treason”](#)
(*The Guardian*)

21 of the 45 men executed in 2025 for “terrorism”-related offences were from Saudi Arabia’s predominantly Shia Eastern Province, highlighting the disproportionate use of the death penalty in cases involving the heavily discriminated-against Saudi Shias.

Use of the death penalty for juveniles

The Saudi authorities are also failing to deliver on what have proved to be false promises in relation to the use of the death penalty for juveniles. International human rights law prohibits the imposition of the death penalty for crimes committed by people when they were children; however, the [executions](#) of Saudi youths **Jalal Labbad** on [21 August](#) and **Abdullah al-Derazi** on [20 October](#), convicted of crimes allegedly committed when they were minors, invalidates the authorities’ [claim](#) to have ended this practice.

Labbad and al-Derazi were convicted on a range of “terrorist” charges, in connection with participation in protests in 2011 and 2012 against the treatment of Saudi Arabia’s marginalised Shia community, as well as their attendance at funerals of individuals killed by security forces. Their sentencing followed grossly unfair trials that failed to meet basic standards of due process and relied almost exclusively on confessions extracted under torture. During interrogation, Labbad was severely beaten with pipes, shoes and cables, had his head banged on the table until he passed out, and suffered electrocution and death threats. Similarly, after his arrest al-Derazi was held incommunicado in solitary confinement for several months, during which he was subjected to physical torture including beatings and burns, resulting in broken teeth and a knee injury that required hospitalisation.

Their executions proceeded despite the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention (WGAD) declaring their detention [arbitrary](#) and UN experts repeatedly urging their [release](#). Use of the death penalty against people who were under 18 years of age at the time of the crime of which they are convicted directly violates the Convention on the Rights of the Child, to which Saudi Arabia is a party.



Jalal Labbad



Abdullah al-Derazi



[Saudi Arabia executes man over protests he attended as a 15-year-old](#)
(Washington Post)

The executions of Labbad and al-Derazi also raise grave fears for other child defendants at [imminent risk of execution](#), including **Youssef al-Manasef**, **Ali al-Mabiyouq**, **Ali Hassan al-Subaiti**, Jawad Qureiris, and **Hassan al-Faraj**, who have had their death sentences upheld by the Specialised Criminal Court of Appeal.

Empty promises regarding the death penalty for juveniles

In 2020, in response to international criticism, the Saudi authorities let it be known that a royal decree had been issued ending judges' discretion to apply the death penalty when sentencing those convicted for offences committed when they were under 18. However, no such decree was published and its status remained unclear. An unofficial version circulating on social media appeared to leave open serious [loopholes](#) by excluding cases brought under the Counter-Terrorism Law and capital crimes under Sharia law.

In April 2020 the Saudi Human Rights Commission (SHRC), the principal official source on the matter, stated that the decree covered the sentencing of juveniles for [any crime, including terrorist offences](#). If implemented, this would have marked a measure of progress. Six months later, after human rights organisations had publicised the flaws in the still unpublished decree, the SHRC [insisted](#) once again that “no one in Saudi Arabia will be executed for a crime committed as a minor”. Yet these official assurances were completely undermined by the [execution](#) in June 2021 of Mustafa Hashem al-Darwish for teenage protests, the passing of further death sentences on juvenile offenders between 2022 and 2024, and now the executions of Jalal Labbad and Abdullah al-Derazi in 2025.

Others at risk of execution

The death penalty is weaponised as part of the authorities' broader campaign of repression, including as a tool to clamp down on dissent. At least **five members of the Huwaitat tribe** have been [sentenced to death](#) for peacefully resisting the forced displacement of their tribe to make way for the state-backed Neom megacity project (see following section on Forced Evictions and Displacement). One of those sentenced, Eid Al-Mashouri al-Huwaiti, was in 2025 released from prison.

Meanwhile, Islamic scholars **Salman al-Odah** and **Hassan Farhan al-Maliki**, for whom the Public Prosecutor has been seeking the death penalty on a range of vaguely formulated charges, continue to have their trials drag on for unknown reasons. Both have been arbitrarily detained since September 2017.

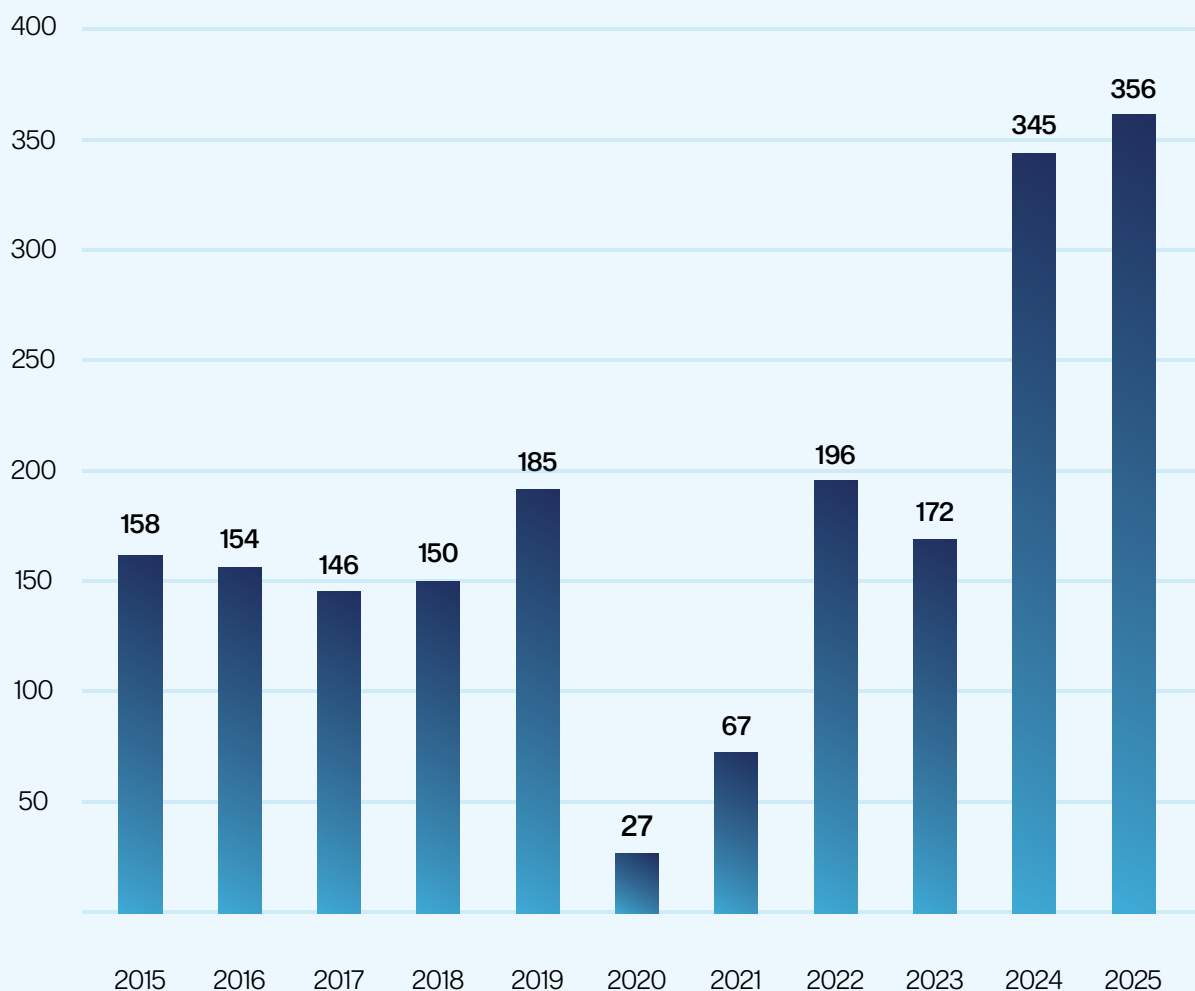
Families left in the dark

In Saudi Arabia the cruelty of execution extends beyond the act itself, as families are frequently prevented from saying goodbye to their loved ones and learn only through the media that an execution has been carried out. They are also often denied the chance to mourn their loved ones in accordance with their religious practices, since the authorities in many cases fail to return victims' bodies to their families, and fail to inform families of the burial site.

2025 in historical perspective

Saudi Arabia has for years been among the countries carrying out the highest number of executions in the world. Despite a [pledge](#) in 2018 from Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman to reduce use of the death penalty, the rate of executions has continued to soar, apart from a relative lull during the coronavirus pandemic. As recently as March 2022, Mohammed bin Salman [repeated the commitment](#) to limit use of the death penalty, yet that year saw a then-record-breaking number of people executed – 196 individuals – which has been significantly surpassed by the tolls in 2024 and 2025. In the absence of transparency, and with executions sometimes carried out in secret, the real figures may be even higher.

Number of known executions in Saudi Arabia since 2015, the beginning of the reign of King Salman



Prisoners Released Under Continuing Restrictions

2025, and the early months of the year in particular, saw scores of prisoners of conscience released – including high-profile human rights defenders and social media influencers – but in most cases only under continuing restrictions on their freedom. Some had completed lengthy prison terms, while others were released partway through their sentences or before being sentenced at all.

The reasons for this development (see “Analysis” in the box below) are hard to fathom, but it does not appear to signal any softening of the authorities’ determination to clamp down on any perceived criticism, calls for reform, or activism in defence of human rights.

While each prisoner release is a welcome development and many have been long overdue, it does not mark the end of the injustice suffered by these individuals. In almost every instance they continue to face harsh restrictions, including electronic tagging and arbitrary bans on work, social media and travel, that have a severe impact on the victims and their families. Many other prisoners of conscience, meanwhile, remain [arbitrarily imprisoned](#).

Prisoners released at or beyond the end of their sentences

Several prisoners of conscience released in 2025 had served lengthy prison terms, and in some cases remained in jail long after their sentences had officially expired. Upon release, these individuals usually faced travel bans imposed by the courts as part of their sentences, normally for the same duration as the prison term itself (see “Travel bans” below).

In the first few days of 2025, Saudi human rights defenders **Mohammed al-Qahtani** and **Essa al-Nukheifi** were [conditionally released](#) after years of arbitrary imprisonment on the basis of their peaceful activism and more than two years’ delay since the completion of their prison terms. Although freed from prison, they remain under lengthy travel bans.

Al-Qahtani, an academic and co-founder of the now-disbanded Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association (ACPRA) had been arbitrarily detained in Al-Hair Prison since 2013 because of his peaceful human rights work and calls for democratic reforms. Instead of being released when his 10-year prison term expired in November 2022, he was forcibly disappeared from October that year until November 2024. Now released, he remains under a 10-year travel ban, which cruelly prevents him, at the age of 60, from being reunited with his wife and five children, who all live in the United States.

Al-Nukheifi had been arbitrarily detained in Al-Hair Prison since 2016 as a result of his activism. Like al-Qahtani, he too was forcibly disappeared from October 2022, after declaring a hunger strike in protest over not being released when his six-year sentence expired. Al-Nukheifi remains under a six-year travel ban.



Mohammed al-Qahtani following his release

On 10 February, Saudi PhD student **Salma al-Shehab** was [released](#) after more than four years of arbitrary imprisonment on the basis of her peaceful online activism supporting women's rights. Her release followed the [reduction](#) of her prison sentence, in September 2024, from 27 years to four with an additional four years suspended, a term which expired in December 2024 [calculated in accordance with the Hijri calendar]. She now faces an eight-year travel ban, which means that she is unable to complete her PhD studies in the United Kingdom, where she was studying prior to her arrest during a holiday visit to her family in Saudi Arabia in January 2021.



Salma al-Shehab



[Leeds student jailed in Saudi Arabia for 34 years over tweets is released](#)
(The Guardian)

Also in February, blogger **Abdulaziz al-Odah** was released, almost three years after completing his two-and-a-half year prison sentence. Al-Odah was arrested in September 2019 after publishing comments on his Twitter account.

In late May, human rights defender **Mohammed al-Rabiah** was released after more than seven years of arbitrary imprisonment. His sentence had earlier been reduced from 17 years to eight with one year suspended, a term which expired in early March. Al-Rabiah was arrested in May 2018 as part of a crackdown against prominent women human rights defenders and several men who advocated for women's rights in Saudi Arabia. He was subjected to [brutal torture](#) and sentenced to prison for his peaceful activism. He remains under a travel ban.



Mohammed al-Rabiah

Also in May, writer and human rights defender **Fadhel al-Manasef** was released after completing a 14-year prison term on charges related to his activism. He now faces a travel ban of the same length. Al-Manasef was a founding member of the Adala Centre for Human Rights, an NGO that the Saudi authorities refused to license, and played a leading role in documenting abuses against demonstrators in the Eastern Province in 2011.

In June, **Khaled al-Odah** was released after almost eight years of arbitrary imprisonment. He was arrested in September 2017 after tweeting about the arrest of his brother, reformist cleric Salman al-Odah. He nevertheless remains under restrictions, including having to wear an electronic tag. A number of others detained in the September 2017 [crackdown on dissent](#) were also released in 2025 after serving their sentences, including doctor and scholar **Abdalmohsen al-Ahmad**, academics **Mohammed al-Barrak** and **Adel Banaima**, and clerics **Ibrahim al-Harhi** and **Gurom al-Beshi**.

In June, **Abdulwahhab** and **Abdulrahman al-Dowaish** were released after more than three years of detention. Meanwhile, their brother Malek has been resented to 15 years in prison (see “Arbitrary Arrests, Detention and Unfair Trials”, [page 13](#)) and their father, Sulaiman al-Dowaish, remains forcibly disappeared (see “Torture and Other Ill-treatment” [page 20](#)).

In July, human rights defender and ACPRA co-founder **Abdulaziz al-Shubaily** was released after completing an eight-year prison term on charges related to his activism in bringing court cases on behalf of dozens of victims of repression, including fellow ACPRA members. Al-Shubaily now faces an eight-year travel ban.



Abdulaziz al-Shubaily

Prisoners released partway through their sentences or even before sentencing

A number of other prisoners of conscience released in 2025, particularly during the early months, were freed either partway through lengthy prison sentences or even before being sentenced. The terms of their release were often left unclear, in keeping with the lack of transparency around judicial processes generally in Saudi Arabia. They have not come about through any royal pardon, and it remains unclear whether outstanding prison sentences have been quashed, thus leaving individuals in fear of re-arrest. It is also possible that they will find themselves facing unofficial travel bans if they try to leave the country (see “Travel bans” below).

A spate of such releases took place during February: of social media influencer **Mansour al-Raqiba**, detained in May 2022 and [sentenced](#) to 27 years in prison over a secretly recorded video criticising the crown prince’s “Vision 2030”; podcast presenter **Hatem al-Najjar**, arrested in January 2024 during an online campaign against him; teacher **Asaad bin Nasser al-Ghamdi**, arrested in 2022 and sentenced to a 20-year jail term for peaceful social media activity; blogger **Ahmed al-Budaiwi**, arrested as a result of a Facebook post about the mass execution of 81 men in March 2022; and nurse **Zeinab al-Rabea**, arrested in June 2022 because of social media posts.

Further such releases took place in subsequent months, including of podiatrist and Wikipedia administrator **Ziyad al-Sufiani**, detained in mid-2020 and sentenced to 14 years in prison; medical student Sara al-Jar, sentenced to 27 years; **Fatima al-Shawarb**, arrested in September 2020 and sentenced to 30 years and six months; and **Sukaynah al-Aithan**, arrested in December 2020 and sentenced to 40 years.

Others released include bloggers arrested in May and June 2021 during a crackdown on people peacefully expressing opinions online – **Asma al-Subeaei**, **Yasmine al-Ghufaili** and medical doctor **Lina al-Sharif** – as well as rapper **Omar Shibouba** (arrested in March 2022), **Shaimaa al-Baqmi** (arrested in April 2022 and forcibly disappeared), **Abdullah al-Duraibi** (arrested in May 2022 and likewise forcibly disappeared) and **Loujain al-Bouq** (arrested in May 2019).

In May, **Fahad Ramadan** was released after a year and a half of arbitrary imprisonment. He is now reunited with his family in the Netherlands, where he lives as a refugee. A Yemeni national, he was arrested in November 2023 during a visit to Saudi Arabia.

Later in the year, journalist **Saeed al-Shahrani** was released after nearly five years in prison, having been sentenced to 16 years. And teacher **Mona al-Bayali**, detained for six years for exercising her right to free speech, was released along with her cousin **Ghaida al-Bayali**, detained for two years in al-Tarafiya Prison.

Dozens of members of the Huwaitat tribe who had been arrested for publicly opposing forced displacement to make way for the state-sponsored Neom megaproject were also released. Among them were **Eid Al-Mashouri al-Huwaiti** (who had been sentenced to death), **Abdullah Dakhil Allah al-Huwaiti** (sentenced to 50 years), **Mohammed Saqr al-Huwaiti** (30 years), **Thamer Tayseer al-Huwaiti** (20 years) and **Ahmed Ataullah al-Huwaiti** (15 years). For more about the case of the Huwaitat tribe, see “Forced Evictions and Displacement”, [page 40](#).

The unexplained and highly conditional release of dozens of prisoners of conscience underscores the arbitrary and unjust nature of the Saudi judicial system as a whole. It highlights both the scale of such detentions in the first place and the urgent need for systemic reform to ensure that all individuals deprived of their liberty are afforded fundamental legal safeguards. Meanwhile, many other prisoners of conscience remain arbitrarily imprisoned, and people continue to be [arbitrarily arrested](#), put on trial and jailed for exercising their basic rights and freedoms.

Analysis: Understanding the recent wave of prisoner releases in Saudi Arabia

After years of resisting widespread calls to release prisoners of conscience in Saudi Arabia, the authorities began, in late 2024, to release dozens of such individuals from prison. This development raised many questions among observers, human rights organisations, journalists and others, as the motives behind these releases were far from clear. Nor can they be understood as serious or genuine steps towards reform.

In many cases those released had already completed their prison sentences, and in some instances exceeded them, before being freed. One prominent example is Mohammed Fahad al-Qahtani, a founding member of the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association (ACPRA), who served his full prison term and, instead of being released, was subjected to enforced disappearance for a prolonged period before his eventual release after several additional years in detention. In other cases, prisoners completed an initial sentence only to be tried and convicted a second time, served that additional sentence in full, and were then released months or even years after its expiry, as in the case of Essa al-Nukheifi. In yet other instances, excessively harsh sentences were partially reduced following intense international pressure, most notably in the case of Salma al-Shehab. Arrested in 2021 for feminist tweets supporting Saudi women’s rights defenders, al-Shehab was initially sentenced to six years in prison, a term that was later increased to an extraordinary 34 years. The sentence provoked global outrage and sustained advocacy campaigns, eventually leading to a reduction of her sentence and her release in 2025.

In several cases, individuals were reportedly informed of their release on a personal basis, without any official announcement of a royal pardon. Notably, King Salman did not issue a comprehensive or public royal pardon for all prisoners of conscience at the outset of his reign, unlike previous Saudi monarchs.

In other cases, no explanation was provided at all: no pardon was announced, no sentences were formally quashed, and no legal justification for the releases was offered. Nevertheless, some observations can be made about the likely reasoning behind this apparent policy shift, if it can indeed be described as such.

As advocacy efforts by organisations such as ALOST and other human rights groups, alongside UN mechanisms, have intensified, the public relations cost of detaining large numbers of political prisoners and peaceful social media users has become increasingly evident to the Saudi authorities. This has coincided with the kingdom's ambition to position itself as a global hub for economic, sporting and entertainment events. Human rights pressure has accompanied nearly all of these initiatives. Rather than allowing these events to function as vehicles for “sportswashing”, “entertainment-washing”, or “economic-washing”, organisations such as ALOST have used them as platforms to spotlight ongoing human rights violations.

In many cases, the sentences imposed on prisoners of conscience were not only unjust but extreme even by the standards of an authoritarian system. The case of Salma al-Shehab remains one of the clearest illustrations of this dynamic.

Looking ahead, preparations for hosting the 2034 FIFA Men's World Cup in Saudi Arabia, along with the many other international events the country currently hosts, are expected to place the kingdom's human rights record under unprecedented scrutiny. This mounting pressure may have prompted the authorities to release a limited number of prisoners while continuing to impose severe restrictions on them. These include travel bans, denial of employment opportunities, house arrest for some, suspension of government and financial services, and, in certain cases, long prison sentences that remain formally in place but are not currently enforced. As a result, many released individuals continue to live under conditions that closely resemble detention, despite their formal release.

The authorities' selection of which prisoners of conscience to release also sheds light on their rationale. The majority of those released had already finished their sentences or were arrested from 2018 onwards. Meanwhile, many veteran human rights defenders remain behind bars and are expected to serve many more years of unjust imprisonment. These include ACPRA members Issa al-Hamid, Mohammed al-Bejadi, and Omar al-Saeed; Jeddah reformist Saud al-Hashemi; and Waleed Abu al-Khair, Khaled al-Omar, and Mohamed al-Otaibi.



It is crucial to stress that the release of prisoners of conscience at the end of lengthy prison terms is not a concession by the authorities; it is a basic right. Moreover, nearly all those released remain subject to extremely restrictive conditions that severely limit their freedom of movement, employment and communication. Those who were subjected to grave abuses including torture, sexual harassment, enforced disappearance and arbitrary detention (which applies to all prisoners of conscience), have received no apology, no compensation, and no justice. None of those responsible for these violations have been held accountable.

Finally, the authorities may believe that these ambiguous and oppressive post-release conditions, and the fear they generate, are sufficient to ensure silence. They may also calculate that keeping many activists imprisoned under unjust sentences, while releasing others under strict travel bans, employment restrictions, social media controls and electronic surveillance, will reduce international pressure and advocacy campaigns.

It is therefore essential to be clear: human rights violations in Saudi Arabia have not ended. While the release of some prisoners is welcome and a source of relief, the continued detention of many others, alongside the severe restrictions imposed on those released, demonstrates that repression persists, albeit in different forms. This reality underscores the urgent need for sustained and ongoing human rights advocacy.



Travel bans after release

For those released, often after years of arbitrary imprisonment and grave violations of their rights, this is rarely the end of their troubles. Release from prison frequently comes with further, hidden forms of repression, as many of them continue to face restrictions on work, social media and, notably, travel. As well as having a severe personal impact on the victims, all of these measures combine to deepen the prevailing climate of fear and intimidation in the country.

Travel bans in Saudi Arabia are usually imposed in advance, to be applied after release from prison, as part of a judicial sentence and normally for the same duration as the prison term itself. When applied against people who have been arbitrarily detained for peacefully exercising their basic rights and/or as a result of unfair, discriminatory or disproportionate proceedings, such travel bans are considered, by extension, to have been arbitrarily imposed. The majority of [prisoners of conscience](#) currently in Saudi prisons thus face the prospect of long travel bans after completion of their time in prison.

The table below gives a non-exhaustive list of Saudi prisoners of conscience who have been released after completion of their prison terms yet remain under travel bans imposed by the courts at the time of sentencing.

Name	Field of activity	Prison sentence
Essam Koshak	Human rights activist and computer engineer	4 years (now expired)
Nassima al-Sadah	Woman human rights defender	5 years
Samar Badawi	Woman human rights defender	5 years
Essa al-Nukheifi	Human rights activist	6 years
Naima al-Matrood	Woman protester	6 years
Nadhir al-Majed	Writer	7 years
Salma al-Shehab	Doctoral student	8 years
Alaa Brinji	Journalist	8 years
Murtaja Qureiris	Child protester	8 years

Abdulaziz al-Shubaily	Human rights defender	8 years
Mohammed al-Rabiah	Human rights defender	8 years
Abdulrahman al-Hamid	Academic and human rights defender	9 years
Dawoud al-Marhoun	Child protester	10 years
Ali al-Nimr	Child protester	10 years
Abdullah al-Zaheer	Child protester	10 years
Raif Badawi	Blogger	10 years
Fahad al-Fahad	Human rights defender	10 years
Abdulkarim al-Khodri	Human rights defender	10 years
Fawzan al-Harbi	Human rights defender	10 years
Mohammed al-Qahtani	Human rights defender and academic	10 years
Fadhel al-Manasef	Writer and human rights defender	14 years
Abdul Rahman al-Shumayri	Academic	15 years
Adel al-Labbad	Poet	15 years
Wajdi al-Ghazzawi	Journalist	20 years

In addition to these court-ordered travel bans the Saudi authorities also impose “unofficial” travel bans without notification of any relevant ministerial order, security justification or specific duration. Sometimes victims only become aware of them when they find themselves barred at the airport or at a border crossing from leaving the country.

Two high-profile victims of this practice are women’s rights activists [Loujain al-Hathloul](#) and [Maryam al-Otaibi](#). Al-Hathloul’s criminal sentence included a travel ban, to follow her release, of two years and 10 months, which was due to expire on 12 November 2023. Since then she has remained unable to travel, despite having received no formal notification from the Saudi authorities of any new or ongoing ban, either judicial or administrative. Based on this precedent, it is feared that others may face the same fate once their court-imposed travel bans expire or if their sentences are quashed. As mentioned above, the terms on which prisoners of conscience have been released partway through their prison terms or prior to being sentenced are on terms that remain largely unknown. While it is possible that some sentences have been quashed, the individuals may still be subjected to unofficial travel bans. Furthermore, since unofficial travel bans like these lack any stated legal basis, there is no way to formally appeal against them or apply to have them lifted.



[Saudi Arabia accused of banning women’s rights activists from leaving the country](#)
(The Guardian)

There are very few examples of released prisoners who are allowed to travel. Retired engineer **Saad Ibrahim al-Madhi**, a 75-year-old dual US-Saudi citizen who was released from Al-Ha’ir Prison on 20 March 2023, remained barred from travelling abroad and reuniting with his family in the United States until, after extensive advocacy efforts, he was finally allowed to leave in November 2025.



Saad Ibrahim al-Madhi



[US citizen jailed in Saudi Arabia for criticising regime allowed to return to US](#)
(BBC)

The Saudi authorities have also been making increasing use of arbitrary travel bans on family members of targeted individuals, in what appears to be a form of collective punishment. This has been the fate of all the al-Hathloul family members remaining in Saudi Arabia – and the entire family in Saudi Arabia, totalling 19 individuals, of reformist cleric [Salman al-Odah](#). Meanwhile, family members living outside the country, including Loujain’s sister Lina al-Hathloul and Salman’s son Abdullah al-Odah, are unable to return for fear of prosecution. [Appeals](#) to the Saudi Human Rights Commission from Saudi nationals living abroad to help lift arbitrary travel bans on their relatives inside the kingdom have repeatedly fallen on deaf ears.

All travel bans, of whatever kind, have serious consequences for the victims' lives, preventing them from visiting family members outside the country, pursuing personal and professional ambitions abroad, or accessing specialist healthcare. This in turn can have a profound impact on the mental and emotional well-being of both the individuals directly affected and their families.

Legality of travel bans

These arbitrary travel bans imposed by the Saudi authorities contravene international human rights law. Article 13 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that “[e]veryone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country”. The Arab Charter on Human Rights, which Saudi Arabia has ratified, states even more explicitly that “citizens shall not be arbitrarily or illegally deprived from leaving any Arab country, including their own”.

They also contravene domestic Saudi law. The Saudi Travel Document Law states that “[n]o person may be barred from travelling except by a judicial ruling or a decision issued by the Minister of Interior or the President of State Security, for specific reasons related to security and for a specific period of time... the person barred from travelling shall be notified within a period not exceeding one week from the date of issuance of said ruling or decision.”

Suspension of government services

Another way in which some released prisoners continue to be made to suffer is through the suspension of government services, an administrative measure typically applied to people who fail to repay debts. For some former detainees, suspension is related to large court-imposed fines, which can reach up to one million Saudi riyals (approximately USD 266,000). For others, no clear explanation is given.

Sanctions of this kind can have serious consequences. They may include blocking access to essential services such as banking or driving licence renewal, limiting mobility in a country with inadequate public transport and making it harder for victims to participate in the labour market. Many former detainees had already lost their jobs upon arrest and continue to face employment discrimination after release. These additional layers of hardship can trap individuals in an endless cycle of frustration, a situation made worse by the vague wording of the law and the absence of effective mechanisms to challenge it.

Forced Evictions and Displacement

Arbitrary land seizures and forced displacement, longstanding practices of the Saudi authorities, have accelerated in recent years, most notably in connection with major development projects such as Neom and Jeddah Central, both of which are featured as tournament venues in Saudi Arabia's 2034 World Cup plans. In 2025 there were further evictions and coercive pressures to make way for Neom, a megaproject now facing significant scaling down amid financial and technical concerns. Meanwhile, further evictions occurred in other parts of the country.

Neom, the megacity

To make way for the construction of Neom, originally envisioned to feature a 170-km-long, 200-metre-wide linear city known as "The Line" as its centrepiece, authorities committed [serious abuses](#) beginning in 2020. Local residents who had long inhabited the region in northwest Saudi Arabia, primarily members of the Huwaitat tribe, were unlawfully dispossessed of their land and forcibly evicted from their homes, often relocated far away and without adequate compensation. Scores of people were arrested and prosecuted for speaking out against these abuses.



[End of The Line: how Saudi Arabia's Neom dream unravelled](#)
(Financial Times)

Despite further scepticism emerging about the state-sponsored project's feasibility, with the original scale and delivery schedule being severely tempered by economic, technical and managerial concerns, similar abuses have continued throughout 2025.

In June, the last remaining residents of Al-Khuraiba, one of the villages affected by the original widescale evictions to make way for Neom, were [finally forced out](#). After the demolition of the village's remaining 15 or so houses in December 2023 and the eviction of most of its population, only the family of Abdul Rahim Al-Huwaiti stayed behind and refused to leave. Al-Huwaiti had been shot dead in 2020 by security forces after vocally and persistently opposing the mass evictions; his family refused to leave while their male relatives remained in prison for peacefully protesting the removals. Following months of unsuccessful pressure to force their departure, Saudi security forces entered Al-Khuraiba during the night of 16 June 2025. In the presence of local governor Mahmoud al-Harbi, they raided the home of the late Abdul Rahim Al-Huwaiti – the last house standing in the village – and evicted the remaining residents at gunpoint, including his mother and sister. Al-Khuraiba is now completely uninhabited.



[Neom | Civils progress update and last indigenous people forcibly evicted](#)
(New Civil Engineer)

Also in 2025, Saudi authorities also renewed efforts to displace residents of al-Muwaila village, another area designated for the Neom project. Schools were shut down, forcing families to send their children to Duba, 47 km away, and residents were warned to evacuate or face cuts to power and water services.



[Saudi authorities accused of attempted displacement of community impacted by Neom port](#) (New Civil Engineer)

As mentioned previously, (see “Prisoners Released Under Continuing Restrictions”, [page 30](#)), dozens of members of the Huwaitat tribe who had been arrested for publicly opposing forced displacement for the Neom megaproject were released in 2025, as part of a wider trend of prisoner releases. They include [Eid Al-Mashouri al-Huwaiti](#) (who had been sentenced to death), [Abdullah Dakhil Allah al-Huwaiti](#) (who had been sentenced to 50 years in prison), **Attia Suleiman al-Tageegi al-Huwaiti** (35 years), **Mohammed Saqr al-Huwaiti** (30 years), **Thamer Tayseer al-Huwaiti** (20 years), **Ahmed Ataullah al-Huwaiti** (15 years), **Abdulaziz al-Mashouri al-Huwaiti**, **Abdulahdi al-Riqabi**, **Abdulmohsen al-Mashouri al-Huwaiti**, **Abdullah Saleh al-Tageegi al-Huwaiti**, **Abdullah Suleiman al-Tageegi al-Huwaiti**, **Ahmed Ataullah al-Huwaiti**, **Ahmed Musa al-Huwaiti**, **Ayman Bukhait al-Huwaiti**, **Hamoud Odeh al-Mashouri al-Huwaiti**, **Ibrahim Ataullah al-Mashouri al-Huwaiti**, **Muhammad Subaih al-Tuqtaqi al-Huwaiti**, **Sami Halil al-Huwaiti** and **Suleiman Huwaimel al-Huwaiti**.



Abdullah Dakhil Allah Saleh al-Huwaiti (far left), pictured at an equestrian race in al-Khuraiba, May 2018

Several of these individuals were not among the members of the Huwaitat tribe that ALOST had previously monitored as being detained for speaking out, indicating that the scale of the arrests was larger than initially appreciated. Meanwhile, many remain in detention, facing lengthy prison sentences of up to 50 years, with some still at risk of execution, and others about whose status no further information is available.

Other demolitions and displacement in 2025

Other demolitions took place throughout 2025 in other parts of the country. While ALQST has not been able to verify with total certainty this information from people on the ground, their accounts nevertheless point to a pattern of demolitions of buildings alleged to have been built without permits, usually carried out without warning or judicial oversight and sometimes accompanied by other violations.

In one example of this practice, in early 2025 ALQST received reports and monitored social media coverage documenting [evacuation orders](#) and [demolitions](#) in several neighbourhoods in western Mecca to make way for Masar Destination, one of 14 planned “[gigaprojects](#)” in the country. Local residents reported receiving no prior notice, among other violations.

Transnational Repression and Threats to Saudis in Exile

As domestic civic space has disappeared, and with activism increasingly taking place from exile, Saudi Arabia's authorities have expanded their reach beyond the country's borders in order to silence dissent abroad. This takes various forms, including requests for extradition, in-person and online harassment and surveillance, and reprisals against family members in Saudi Arabia. ALQST continued to document examples of such tactics during 2025 and, together with partner organisations, highlighted the trend in written evidence to the UK Parliament's Joint Committee on Human Rights as part of the Select Committee's inquiry into transnational repression worldwide.

Extradition to and from Saudi Arabia

One of the tactics the Saudi authorities use, as part of a pattern of intimidation and reprisals against peaceful activists, is extradition. In January 2023, for example, Saudi national **Hassan al-Rabea** was arrested at Marrakesh Airport while attempting to travel to Turkey, under a provisional arrest warrant issued at the request of the Saudi authorities for reasons related to his religious beliefs and his family's history of political activism. Weeks later, despite repeated calls from civil society to prevent the move, al-Rabea was [extradited from Morocco](#) and forcibly returned to Saudi Arabia, where he was arrested and forcibly disappeared for months. He remains in detention awaiting trial.

As well as bringing fabricated criminal charges against Saudi individuals abroad to engineer their extradition to Saudi Arabia, the authorities have sometimes arrested and extradited foreign nationals in the kingdom at the request of other repressive governments. They extradited Egyptian national **Ahmed Fathi Kamal Kamel**, for example, on 5 March 2025 to Egypt, where he had been sentenced in absentia in 2021 to 25 years in prison for his participation in the Arab Spring protests in 2011 and 2014. Following a retrial, however, he was acquitted and released.

Risks to Saudi asylum-seekers of deportation back to the kingdom

Amid mounting repression in recent years, increasing numbers of Saudis have left the kingdom and applied for asylum abroad, seeking freedom or to escape grave violations of their rights by the Saudi state. The authorities in other states, however, are not always aware of the dangers for peaceful, law-abiding activists and government critics in Saudi Arabia, and such individuals can risk being deported back to the kingdom in violation of the host states' obligations under international law.

One example of this is the case of Saudi human rights defender **Abdulrahman AlBakr al-Khalidi**, who has spent more than four years in detention during a prolonged asylum process in Bulgaria. According to public data from the European Court of Human Rights, this is one of the longest periods for any asylum seeker in Europe. It has been spent mostly under harsh and degrading conditions at Sofia's Busmantsi Detention Centre. Al-Khalidi remains at [imminent risk](#) of deportation to Saudi Arabia,



*Abdulrahman AlBakr
al-Khalidi*

where he would be at real risk of serious human rights violations due to his peaceful activism in the kingdom and in exile. The Bulgarian authorities have ignored or circumvented several court rulings in his favour, including final judgments ordering his release, and on 26 September 2025 the Directorate of Migration decided to extend al-Khalidi's detention for another six months.

Al-Khalidi's case was highlighted in a [study](#) on the transnational repression of human rights defenders published on 12 June 2025, by the European Parliament's Subcommittee on Human Rights (DROI), as a key example of the tactic of detention used in physical transnational repression.

In-person and online threats and intimidation, and digital surveillance

Saudis in exile often continue to face various forms of transnational repression abroad. In July 2025 FairSquare, ALQST and Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy (BIRD) submitted [written evidence](#) to the UK Parliament's Joint Committee on Human Rights as part of the Select Committee's inquiry into transnational repression. Our input described several cases of transnational repression involving Saudi Arabia, as well as Bahrain, Egypt and the UAE, that have taken place in recent years in the UK alone. Examples involving Saudi nationals included intimidation via social media, such as a [barrage of threats](#) directed at former Saudi police colonel Rabih Alenezi; in-person attacks, including assaults on Saudi activist Ghanem al-Dosari in central London; and digital surveillance, where authorities have infiltrated and used foreign companies to spy on individuals and conduct cybersurveillance. The most notorious case to date involves the Israeli spyware company NSO Group, through which Saudi human rights defender and ALQST founder Yahya Assiri was subjected to sustained attacks. Assiri is pursuing a [legal claim](#) against Saudi Arabia in the British courts.

Failure of host governments to respond adequately

Citing a range of cases, the three organisations argued in their evidence to the Joint Committee there are significant limitations to the British state's reliance on the police to respond to such acts of transnational repression. When a knife was found outside Yahya Assiri's kitchen window, for example, the police refused to review CCTV footage in the area or take fingerprints from the knife, telling him "it costs money" and that "no crime has yet happened". Meanwhile, Foreign Office officials sometimes advise victims of transnational repression that they cannot take up their cases, as they are potentially criminal offences. ALQST and its partners therefore called on the British government to take a consistent approach to the risk of transnational repression regardless of its relationship with the perpetrating state.

Reprisals against family members

Repression of the Saudi authorities' victims often extends to targeting their family members with measures such as arrests, prosecution and travel bans, in an attempt to silence Saudi activists in exile. An egregious example of this is the case of the al-Jabri family. In March 2020 the Saudi authorities arbitrarily arrested then-21-year-old **Omar al-Jabri** and 19-year-old **Sarah al-Jabri** in an attempt to pressure their father **Saad al-Jabri**, a former senior Saudi intelligence official who had brought a US lawsuit against Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, to return to Saudi Arabia from exile. The two siblings were later sentenced, following a grossly unfair trial held in secret, to nine and six and a half years respectively in prison, where they still remain.

The Saudi authorities have also been making increasing use of arbitrary travel bans on family members of targeted individuals, in what appears to be a form of collective punishment (see "Prisoners Released Under Continuing Restrictions", [page 30](#)).

Women's Rights

While some restrictions on women have been lifted in recent years, women in Saudi Arabia still faced systemic discrimination in 2025. Women human rights defenders and activists continue to face arrest and prosecution, and the 2022 Personal Status Law, presented as a major reform, actually codified much of the oppressive male guardianship system. It is deeply concerning that on 22 October 2025, on Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's recommendation, King Salman appointed as the new Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia Saleh al-Fawzan, an influential scholar with a record of making deeply misogynistic statements.

Gender discrimination codified in law

The legal framework affecting the lives of women in Saudi Arabia is shaped by the 2022 Personal Status (or Family) Law, which, despite being touted by the authorities at the time as a major reform, in fact entrenches many pernicious features of the traditional male guardianship system.

Previously, in the absence of a codified family law, rulings on family issues were left entirely to the discretion of judges, who often discriminated harshly against women. The new law was eagerly awaited as a significant step forward, but in fact proved to affirm and codify many features of the male guardianship system. It also contains legal loopholes that have continued to allow discretionary interpretation, thus diminishing the impact of the positive changes it did introduce. As a result, the male guardianship system – a legal framework that treats adult women as minors – continues to negatively affect all aspects of women's lives and to severely restrict their fundamental liberties.

Under the Personal Status Law, women still need the consent of their male legal guardians to get married, and are expected to “obey” their husbands or, if not married, a male family member. Furthermore, the financial support a woman receives is contingent on her “submitting herself” to her husband. Women who wish to pursue a career, for example, run the risk that their guardian may not approve their choice. All of this places women at increased risk of domestic violence, but if they choose to leave the family home they can be reported to the authorities for having shown “disobedience” by “running away”. The police will often cooperate with the father, husband, brother or son to send a woman back home against her will, regardless of any abuse she may have suffered at their hands.

In further gender discrimination, under the Saudi nationality law officially referred to as the Saudi Arabian Citizenship System, only in extremely rare circumstances can Saudi women pass on their nationality to their children, whereas the children of Saudi men automatically acquire Saudi nationality at birth.

Girls' and Women's "Care" Institutions

In the absence of independent women's refuges, the only institution female victims of domestic abuse can turn to is a *Dar al-Re'aya* (literally "care home" in Arabic). These institutions are in fact detention facilities for young women and girls who have turned delinquent or been accused as such by their male guardians because of "disobedience". Women can be detained in these institutions for long periods at the mercy of their male guardians, without whose consent they cannot be released. Despite their name, these state-run institutions neither care for women nor provide them adequate shelter from domestic violence. On the contrary, in most cases they deprive women of their liberty, control them, and punish them for their "disobedience".



[Revealed: Saudi Arabia's secretive rehabilitation "prisons" for disobedient women](#)
(*The Guardian*)

Ongoing targeting of women's rights supporters

The authorities meanwhile continue to target and punish women's rights activists, human rights defenders and even private individuals expressing support for women's rights, which severely undermines the official narrative of gender equality reforms. In recent years, the Saudi courts have convicted and passed long jail sentences on several women over peaceful rights activity on social media, and while some have been conditionally released, several remain arbitrarily imprisoned, including: **Manahel al-Otaibi** (resentenced in 2025 to five years' imprisonment), 19-year-old secondary school student **Manal al-Gafiri** (18 years) and **Nourah al-Qahtani** (45 years).

The cases of Manahel al-Otaibi and her sister **Fouz al-Otaibi** stand in particularly stark contrast to the authorities' talk of women's rights reform, with Manahel sentenced to five years in prison, and Fouz facing charges in absentia, for their choice of clothing and expression of feminist views online (for more see "Arbitrary Arrests, Detention and Unfair Trials", [page 13](#)). Manahel had even given an [interview](#) in 2019 in which she said she felt free to wear what she liked and express her views on the basis of the crown prince's public declarations. Yet she was arrested and sentenced for exercising exactly those freedoms.

The Otaibi sisters' cases highlight the ambiguity of Saudi Arabia's shifting policy on the issue of women's clothing. As part of a drive to open up the country for tourism, in 2019 the authorities announced a relaxation of dress codes for foreign women visiting the country. However, this concession was not extended to female citizens and residents, who face legal uncertainty: there have been numerous reports of other Saudi women being arrested since then under vague and broad accusations of wearing "indecent" clothing.

A similar inconsistency can be seen with regard to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people. Although the website of the Saudi Tourism Authority states that the kingdom welcomes LGBT guests, this policy is applied inconsistently, and citizens are treated differently from foreign tourists. Once again, it appears that the Saudi authorities' eagerness to project a progressive and reformist image abroad does not reflect a lessening of repression at home. Preparations for the 2034 World Cup are likely to increase pressure for greater clarity and genuine tolerance of free expression.

Meanwhile, prominent women human rights defenders including **Nassima al-Sadah**, **Samar Badawi** and **Loujain al-Hathloul**, who have long advocated for women's rights, continue to face heavy restrictions since being released from prison, notably arbitrary and unofficial travel bans that prevent them, and their families, from leaving the country (see "Prisoners Released Under Continuing Restrictions", [page 30](#)).



Loujain al-Hathloul

Appointment of new Grand Mufti

The appointment of Saleh al-Fawzan as the new Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia, given his long record of deeply discriminatory and inflammatory statements that undermine women's rights, also undermines claims by Saudi Arabia's leaders to be champions of women's empowerment.

Al-Fawzan has previously made profoundly misogynistic remarks, stating that "the term 'domestic violence' is what has caused women to rebel" and describing women as "like the feeble-minded and the foolish; they have neither intellect nor religion". In 2011 he also publicly opposed a minimum age for marriage.

His appointment takes place within a legal environment in which disagreement with the Grand Mufti's views or official religious rulings can itself constitute a crime. In Saudi Arabia, fatwas and rulings issued by the Council of Senior Ulema, which the Grand Mufti chairs, are treated as sources of law – and challenging them can result in criminal charges.



[Saudi Arabia's violence against women isn't culture – it's policy](#)
(by Maryam Aldossari)

Rights of Non-Saudi Residents and Migrant Workers

Despite limited reforms in recent years, Saudi Arabia's notorious *kafala* (sponsorship) system remains largely intact, with migrant workers continuing to face routine abuse including wage theft, forced labour, and inadequate health and safety protections. The country's growing dependence on migrant labour, particularly in the construction sector for "gigaprojects" and infrastructure for the 2034 World Cup, significantly heightens the risks of large-scale exploitation and potential worker deaths.

Demographics

Like the other Gulf Cooperation Council states, Saudi Arabia has relied heavily on foreign labour since the oil discoveries of the 1930s. According to the [General Authority for Statistics](#), Saudi Arabia's population of 35.3 million is today composed of 19.6 million Saudi nationals (55.6%) and over 15.7 million non-Saudi residents (44.4%). These non-Saudi residents are a diverse cohort, originating primarily from South Asia (India, Pakistan and Bangladesh), Southeast Asia (the Philippines and Indonesia), East Africa (Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda), and Arab countries (Egypt, Yemen and Syria), with smaller numbers from Western countries. They constitute a substantial majority (approximately 77%) of the private-sector workforce, particularly in construction, services, retail, and domestic work. All foreign workers can encounter challenges stemming from the complexities of the labour laws and the *kafala* system (discussed below), but the severity of abuse varies significantly according to intersecting forms of discrimination and risk related to nationality, sector, gender and race.

Naturalisation and citizenship

While most non-Saudi residents eventually return to their countries of origin after spending several years as migrant workers, many have lived in Saudi Arabia for decades or even their entire lives. Despite this long-term presence, they are largely excluded from pathways to citizenship, leaving them in a state of legal precarity and subject to discrimination and social insecurity.

At the same time, a growing number of Saudi Arabians known as "bidoon" (meaning "without" in Arabic, i.e. without nationality) are legally stateless and as such have no rights to education, healthcare, employment, documents such as marriage and birth certificates, or any other benefit of citizenship in the kingdom. Estimates of their number vary between 70,000 and 250,000. Saudi Arabia is the only country they have ever known, yet without Saudi ID cards or passports every aspect of their lives is an unjust struggle (for more details, see previous [Annual Reports](#)).

The kafala system

Saudi Arabia's *kafala* system is an abusive recruitment framework that ties foreigners working in the kingdom to an individual resident who acts as his or her sponsor. This makes them vulnerable to exploitation, as it gives the employer excessive power over the employee, including their visa and residence status and ability to travel. There have been some reforms to the labour laws in recent years, including the Labour Reform Initiative of 2021 that allows migrant workers, in certain

narrow circumstances, to change jobs or leave the country without obtaining their employer's (or sponsor's) consent. In February 2025 additional reforms were [enacted](#), including provisions related to resignation and outsourcing. Despite repeated claims by Saudi authorities and media outlets that the *kafala* system has been "abolished", it remains largely intact. The reforms leave significant loopholes and structural issues unresolved, while persistent gaps in enforcement continue to pose clear risks of exploitation.

As such, all workers in Saudi Arabia, and particularly the millions of low-paid workers recruited from some of the world's poorest countries, remain vulnerable to abuse including contract substitution, exorbitant recruitment fees, non-payment of wages, confiscation of passports by employers, forced labour, and a weak, poorly enforced health and safety regime.



[Beyond the façade: The realities of labour reforms in Saudi Arabia](#)
(The Building and Wood Workers' International (BWI))

Risks to migrant workers as Saudi Arabia builds gigaprojects and prepares for the World Cup

The migrant workers who underpin Saudi Arabia's construction industry typically endure poor working conditions, including long hours outdoors in the country's harsh climate, which frequently leads to heat stress and other serious health problems. Historically, when workers in the kingdom have lost their lives, their deaths have often not been properly investigated, and their families have received inadequate compensation.

Against this backdrop of systemic abuse, Saudi Arabia's ambitious infrastructure plans under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's Vision 2030 economic programme significantly heighten the risk of labour exploitation and widespread rights violations, including worker fatalities. Preparations for the 2034 World Cup alone require the rapid construction of at least eight new stadiums from scratch. Throughout 2025 NGO reports documented serious and pervasive abuses of migrant workers' rights on construction sites across the country amid a building boom fuelled by the tournament. Rights groups have been urging foreign companies to carry out migrant worker-focused due diligence when entering into World Cup contracts, and pointing out that the high level of subcontracting prevalent in Saudi Arabia means that they have to scrutinise their whole supply chains for human rights compliance and risk mitigation.



["Nobody wants to work in these situations": A decade of exploitation on the Riyadh Metro project](#) (Amnesty International)



[Human rights groups warn of "surge" in migrant worker deaths in Saudi Arabia](#) (BBC)

Domestic workers

Domestic workers, such as housekeepers, cleaners, and private drivers, are arguably the most vulnerable category of migrant worker in Saudi Arabia. They often find themselves being required to work around the clock seven days a week, having 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, with sponsors hiring out female workers by the hour for their own gain. The situation varies according to the worker's nationality and the protection they are able to get from their country's embassy.

In September 2024, a [new law for domestic workers](#), Ministerial Decision No. 40676 of 2 October 2023 (03/17/1445 AH), came into effect, superseding the previous law, [Ministerial Decision No. 310 of 2013](#). The new law introduced several important provisions, including a ban on passport confiscation, the establishment of maximum working hours (10 hours per day), a minimum age limit (21 years) and a right for domestic workers to terminate their contracts under certain circumstances. However, it failed to address other important issues, such as establishing a minimum wage. The real impact of the new law now rests on the degree of implementation and enforcement, which historically have been poor.

In April 2024, the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development (MHRSD) announced that it would also revise the [regulations on domestic workers who abscond](#), making it easier to transfer employment under certain conditions. The revised regulations were due to take effect in July 2024, though it is unclear whether they have yet been implemented.



[Shattered Dreams, Hidden Trauma: The Systemic Abuse of East African Care Workers in the Gulf](#) (Equidem)

Lack of grievance mechanisms and access to justice

Saudi Arabia's vast migrant workforce continues to suffer major barriers to reclaiming unpaid wages when employers fail to meet their contractual obligations. Domestic workers continue to face significant challenges accessing justice. Despite the introduction of new regulations and initiatives including a process for filing disputes electronically with the MHRSD, the lack of legal support coupled with domestic workers' extreme isolation, their heavy dependence on their employers, and the ongoing widespread practices of phone and passport confiscation represent considerable barriers to accessing justice.

Recommendations

Recommendations for international stakeholders:

(i) Businesses

- In line with the UN Guiding Principles for Business and Human Rights, conduct thorough human rights due diligence when engaging in business with the Saudi authorities;
- Engage in meaningful consultation with affected communities, Saudi civil society members in the diaspora, and other relevant stakeholders, in order to gauge existing or potential adverse human rights impacts;
- Ensure that the services, technologies and materials provided to the Saudi authorities cannot and will not be used in violations of basic human rights;
- Reassess your business engagement, and be prepared to cease such engagement or tie it to strict human rights conditions, unless and until the adverse human rights impacts can be addressed.

(ii) Governments

- Suspend the supply of arms, other military equipment and surveillance technology at risk of being used to commit or facilitate serious rights violations;
- Write clear commitments to the rule of law and international human rights standards into the objectives of any trade, security or partnership deals negotiated with Saudi Arabia, and set clear and specific human rights benchmarks;
- Exert public and private pressure on the Saudi Arabian authorities to improve their human rights record (see below), including on thematic issues and, crucially, individual cases of concern;
- Request access to relevant trial hearings, and press the Saudi authorities on the issue of access to the country for international NGOs, parliamentarians and UN fact-finding missions;
- Meet the growing challenge of transnational human rights violations by Saudi Arabia, including by providing protection and support for victims, limiting the ability of perpetrators to commit transnational repression and bringing accountability for such acts;
- Support multilateral action at the United Nations, including following up on the recommendations made during Saudi Arabia's latest UPR review in January 2024 to ensure the Saudi authorities implement them, and actively support, or ideally endorse, proposals to establish a UN monitoring mechanism with a country mandate to report and advise on human rights in Saudi Arabia;
- Urge the authorities in Saudi Arabia to implement the recommendations below.

Recommendations for the Saudi authorities:

- 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;
- Ratify the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and its optional protocols;
- 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 who are being detained for exercising their fundamental freedoms;
- Immediately lift all remaining restrictions, including travel bans – whether judicial, administrative or unofficial – imposed on those who have been conditionally released after imprisonment for exercising their rights to freedom of expression, assembly and association;
- Immediately lift unofficial travel bans imposed on family members of targeted individuals, and respect their right to freedom of movement;
- Allow human rights organisations to register in Saudi Arabia and guarantee that they can operate without any intimidation; and allow independent human rights organisations and UN Special Procedures and mechanisms access to the country to monitor human rights abuses on the ground;
- 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 countering terrorism;
- 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, ill-treatment and deaths in custody, holding perpetrators accountable and providing victims with effective remedy in line with international standards;
- Put an end to the practice of enforced disappearance and ratify the UN Convention on the Protection of all Persons from Enforced Disappearance, which Saudi Arabia, during its fourth Universal Periodic Review (UPR), accepted a recommendation to do;
- 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;
- Establish a moratorium on use of the death penalty with the aim of working towards its abolition; in the meantime, amend all existing legislation to limit application of the death penalty to only the most serious crimes and prohibit the execution of minors or those convicted of offences carried out when minors;

- Publish disaggregated data annually on use of the death penalty, including the number of executions carried out, the number of people sentenced to death and on death row, and the number of death sentences quashed or commuted on appeal or in cases in which amnesty or pardon has been granted;
- 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;
- Immediately abolish the male guardianship system, repealing laws and ending practices that discriminate against women;
- Amend the Personal Status (Family) Law so that it fully safeguards the rights of women and children;
- Introduce legislation to fully abolish the *kafala* system;
- 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;
- 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.

