

# The Saudi Diaspora:

## A growing community of emigrés and refugees

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# Introduction

It has been estimated that more than five percent of Saudi Arabian nationals are today living outside the kingdom. They include diplomats and their families, business people, and students sent abroad on Saudi government scholarships – but also a growing number of refugees and asylum-seekers. Saudi Arabia is not in a war zone, nor is it a land of natural disasters or humanitarian crises. So who are these Saudis in exile, and why are they leaving behind their wealthy country, whose leaders claim to be creating new economic opportunities and building a liberal, bright, modern future for their citizens?

This paper presents and analyses the findings of a survey entitled “Saudi Citizens and Residents in Exile” conducted by ALQST in early 2024. Its purpose was to better understand the reasons why Saudis in the diaspora have left their homeland and choose to stay away, and the challenges they face in their host countries. The survey also explored their continuing links with family and friends back home, their sense of community with other Saudis abroad, and the potential for collective social and political organisation among them to help bring about the changes that might allow them, some day, to return safely to the kingdom.

# Executive Summary

According to data from the UNHCR, the United Nations refugee agency, the number of Saudi Arabians fleeing their country and seeking asylum abroad has increased significantly over the past decade, a period that saw a marked increase in authoritarianism and loss of freedom in Saudi Arabia. Yet little is known about this growing community of emigrés and refugees and the challenges they face.

This briefing is based on findings from a confidential online survey entitled “Saudi Citizens and Residents in Exile”, conducted by ALQST in early 2024 among Saudi citizens and former long-term residents of Saudi Arabia now living in the diaspora. A total of 100 individuals responded to the survey out of more than 200 contacted, and 67 of them completed it in part or in full. Although the survey’s sample size was relatively small, the response rate was impressive, especially when one considers the perceived risks involved in taking part.

The findings of the survey were grouped under five questions, as follows:

## 1. What do we know about the Saudi citizens and residents who responded?

Participants were asked about their age, gender, sexual orientation, marital status, religion, home region in Saudi Arabia, level of education, previous occupation, and legal status in their host country. They proved to be a diverse cohort, reflecting the demographic diversity of Saudi Arabia itself. A high proportion (46%) identified as refugees or asylum-seekers.

## 2. What were their reasons for leaving their home country?

The survey participants had left Saudi Arabia for a variety of reasons, but the most frequently mentioned were a lack of freedom and feelings of vulnerability because of their activism or that of family members, or because of their sexual orientation. A surprisingly high proportion cited domestic violence, with the failure of the Saudi system to provide protection being the factor that had driven victims to seek safety abroad. Nearly a quarter of respondents had sought help with their problems from official bodies before leaving the kingdom, without receiving any satisfaction.

The overwhelming majority believed they would not be safe returning to Saudi Arabia, even if the authorities gave them assurances of safety.

### 3. What are their experiences of living abroad?

Participants were asked about the difficulties they had experienced living abroad, both in their personal lives and in relation to their legal situation and career prospects. There were supplementary questions about their mental health and that of their close family members. Money, jobs and housing were the problems most frequently mentioned. Cybersurveillance and harassment from online trolls were also significant issues for many Saudi exiles.

### 4. What are their thoughts about the current situation in Saudi Arabia?

Survey participants were asked their views on recent changes in Saudi Arabia, such as Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's Vision 2030 economic transformation programme, the hosting of major international cultural and sports events, and the state of human rights and civil liberties. Their answers were overwhelmingly negative, but there were mixed views on whether Saudi activists living abroad could have an impact on work to build democracy in Saudi Arabia.

### 5. What changes would need to take place in Saudi Arabia before diaspora Saudis would consider going back?

More than half of the participants said they had no plans to go back, mostly because of personal safety concerns, fear and mistrust of the current Saudi government, and a perceived lack of legal protection for women and LGBT people. Some respondents expressed a dislike of Saudi society and the country generally, or simply felt settled in their new country and had no reason to go back.

The changes the diaspora Saudis most wanted to see were political freedom/democracy (91%), improvements in employment opportunities and workers' rights (68%), gender equality (54%) and acceptance of the LGBT community (41%).

The survey's findings are largely consistent with ALQST's previous research and intelligence from sources on the ground inside Saudi Arabia, as well as the issues arising in its casework with Saudi asylum-seekers in Europe and North America. They therefore significantly reinforce ALQST's arguments for radical improvements to the kingdom's track record on human rights, and indicate a possible basis for collective advocacy by diaspora Saudis more widely.

The report concludes that major reforms would be needed before the majority of Saudi nationals abroad would consider returning to the kingdom, given their fears for their safety and profound mistrust of the authorities. First and foremost would have to be tangible guarantees of free speech, freedom of opinion and expression, and freedom of assembly and association. Legislation guaranteeing civil and political liberties and providing protection for vulnerable minorities and victims of abuse, particularly women, would need to be passed and upheld by an independent judiciary. Releasing prisoners of conscience would be the clearest evidence of the authorities' good faith.

The survey's findings strongly reinforce ALQST's repeated calls for wholesale reform and guarantees of basic rights for all Saudi citizens and residents without distinction, in a legal framework aligned with international human rights standards and implemented and enforced by a judiciary fully independent of the governing authorities.

The report also suggests actions that host countries and the international community could take to support Saudi Arabians in exile and their desire for reforms at home:

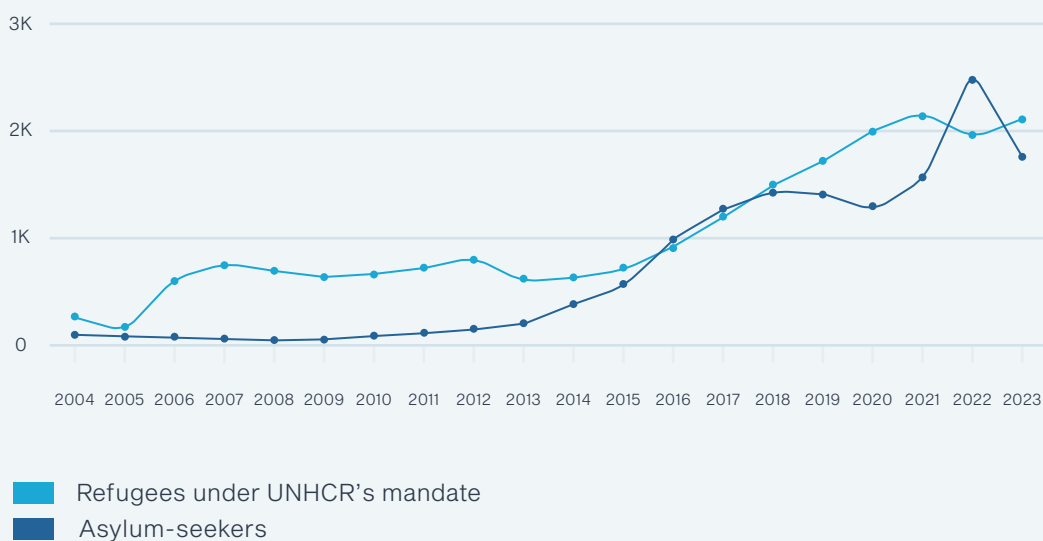
- Saudi nationals seeking asylum or at risk of deportation should be protected and claims of threats to their safety should be taken seriously.
- Transnational repression in the form of cybersurveillance and cyberbullying should be addressed.
- Civil associations of Saudi emigrés and their allies deserve support in their advocacy for basic human rights and political and civil liberties in the Saudi kingdom.
- In order to tackle the root causes of Saudis fleeing their country, the work of human rights organisations like ALQST, and advocates at the United Nations and with governments and parliaments everywhere, should be strengthened and widely supported.



# Background

According to data from the UNHCR, the United Nations refugee agency, the number of Saudi Arabians fleeing their country and seeking asylum abroad has increased significantly over the past decade. (It should be noted that only around one-third of all refugees and asylum-seekers globally are registered in the UNHCR system.) In 2013 the UNHCR recorded 575 Saudi refugees in 14 countries around the world, and a further 192 seeking asylum. In the first half of 2023 the figures had shot up to 2,100 Saudi refugees in 25 countries, and 1,748 asylum-seekers.

**Refugees under UNHCR’s mandate and asylum-seekers, by country of origin: Saudi Arabia, 2004 to mid-2023**



Source: <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/download/?url=qCxFN8>



The same period saw a marked increase in authoritarianism and loss of freedom in Saudi Arabia, an absolute monarchy with no political representation and few civil liberties. Since King Salman came to the throne in 2015 and his son Mohammed bin Salman became crown prince in 2017, state power has become even more concentrated, and the grip of the security authorities has increased. While claiming to be championing liberal reforms, the country's leaders have progressively clamped down on any whisper of dissent or criticism. Today there is no independent civil society left, and free speech, peaceful assembly and association are non-existent.

Since 2014, ALQST has closely monitored and documented the deteriorating state of human rights in Saudi Arabia: sweeping waves of arbitrary arrests, lengthy prison sentences following unfair trials under draconian laws, and a sharp increase in the number of executions carried out, often target the kingdom's Shi'a minority on protest-related charges. Women continue to live as second-class citizens under the oppressive male guardianship system, despite the easing of certain restrictions.

In a bid to diversify the oil-dependent Saudi economy, and facing international criticism of their dismal human rights record, the Saudi authorities have poured huge amounts of money into trying to make the kingdom more appealing to outsiders as an investment opportunity and as a tourist destination. They have loosened once strictly conservative social norms, bought dominant stakes in globally popular sports like football and golf, and sought to project a high-tech, futuristic image with grandiose schemes like the megacity of Neom. Yet behind the glittering projections, they have failed to address the urgent need for political and democratic reforms.

Amid the mounting repression in recent years, and the stifling lack of freedom, more and more Saudi citizens and long-term residents have been leaving the country and seeking asylum abroad. ALQST's founder, Yahya Assiri, was one of those forced into exile when, in 2013, fellow activists and friends were being arrested and prosecuted for peacefully debating and calling for reform. Some have remained active in the diaspora, setting up NGOs ([ALQST for Human Rights](#), [The European Saudi Organisation for Human Rights \(ESOHR\)](#), [Diwan Democracy](#)), a media outlet ([Sowt al-Naas](#)) and even a political party ([The National Assembly Party \(NAAS\)](#)).

Yet relatively little is known about this growing cohort, and apart from an [insightful paper](#) by respected academic Professor Madawi Al-Rasheed, herself a Saudi exile, little has been written about the challenges they face, including various forms of transnational repression and online abuse from Saudi government agents. In most cases they are also separated from their families, many of whom are unable to leave Saudi Arabia because of arbitrary travel bans.



# The Survey: “Saudi Citizens and Residents in Exile”

This briefing is based on findings from a confidential online survey entitled “Saudi Citizens and Residents in Exile”, that was developed by ALQST in late 2023 and distributed privately in early 2024 to a wide network of Saudi citizens and former long-term residents of Saudi Arabia now living in the diaspora. To be eligible to take part, respondents had to be at least 18 years old, be a Saudi Arabian citizen or resident in exile, and identify as feeling unsafe to return to Saudi Arabia. The survey was administered and the responses were processed in both Arabic and English, with respondents able to take part in either language. A total of 100 individuals responded to the survey out of more than 200 contacted, and 67 of them – 57 Saudi nationals and five long-term former residents, the rest unspecified – completed it in part or in full.

Although the survey’s sample size was relatively small, the response rate was impressive, especially when one considers the risks many perceived in taking part. Some who declined to participate, when asked why, cited digital security concerns and fears that their personal data might fall into the hands of the Saudi authorities, who might then punish them in some way, or arbitrarily arrest family members still living in the kingdom, or ban them from travelling abroad. Against this background, ALQST’s researchers took a rigorous approach to the ethical responsibilities involved in conducting such a project, not only in their privacy and data protection processes but also in their communication with participants at every stage, and in the framing of the questionnaire.

# A. Findings

## 1.

### What do we know about the Saudi citizens and residents who responded?

The survey sample was too small for us to judge how representative it might be of the total population of Saudi exiles and emigrés, but it was large and diverse enough to provide an interesting general overview of the Saudi diaspora. A high proportion (46%) identified as refugees or asylum-seekers.

The respondents were mainly aged between 18 and 49, with a few in their sixties. Of those willing to disclose their gender, there was an even balance between males and females; and of those willing to disclose their sexual orientation, the ratio between heterosexuals and LGBT+ individuals was roughly 3:1. More than half (51%) of the participants were single or divorced, while a quarter were married and the others – apart from a few who were “in a relationship” – were unwilling to give their marital status. As a cohort, the respondents were generally well educated, with 72% having been to university, and they came from a wide range of professional and occupational backgrounds.

Asked about their religious background, the majority identified as Muslims, and mostly as Sunni Muslims. However, a significant minority identified as Shia Muslims, and even more said they had no religion. There were also individuals who identified as “atheist”, “atheist but family background is Shia”, “Sufi Muslim” or “from a Shia father and Sunni mother”.

Participants came from most regions of the kingdom, notably Riyadh, Mecca and the largely Shia Eastern Province, and more than a third of those who responded said they had been living in exile for more than 10 years.

**Demographic findings in detail:** Participants were asked about their age, gender, sexual orientation, marital status, religion, home region in Saudi Arabia, level of education, previous occupation, and legal status in their host country. They proved to be a diverse cohort, as shown below, reflecting the demographic diversity of Saudi Arabia itself.



### What is your age group?

18-28	30-39	40-49	50-59	60+	Prefer not to say
31%	31%	27%	0	3%	8%

### What is your sex?

Male	Female	Prefer not to say
43%	45%	12%

### What is your sexual orientation?

Heterosexual	Gay/lesbian	Bisexual	Other	Prefer not to say
62%	6%	7.5%	7.5%	17%

Those who answered “Other” to the question on sexual orientation were invited to give specific details; the responses included “transgender”, “trans man” and “normal”.



### What is your marital status?

Single	Married	In a relationship	Divorced	Widowed, separated, other	No answer
43.5%	25%	6%	7.5%	0%	18%

### What is your religious background?

Muslim (Sunni)	Muslim (Shia)	Other	No religion	Prefer not to say
45%	9%	7.5%	22%	16.5%

### What region (province) of Saudi Arabia do you come from?

Riyadh	Mecca	Eastern Province	Other (seven other provinces mentioned)	No answer
36%	18%	18%	15%	13%



The non-Saudi former long-term residents were asked to name their country of origin; fewer than half answered this question, but Sudan and the United States were mentioned. They were also asked how much time they had spent in Saudi Arabia; again, fewer than half responded, and their answers ranged from eight to 40 years, with an average of just over 21 years. Two of the Saudi nationals also answered the question about time spent in the kingdom, saying respectively “36 years” and “nearly all my life, except for five years”.

### What is the highest degree or level of education you have completed?

Secondary	University	Prefer not to say
15%	72%	13%

### Were you working in Saudi Arabia?

Yes	No	No answer
57%	28%	15%

Those who said they had been working in Saudi Arabia reported a wide range of occupations and employment, from commerce, education and administration, manufacturing and construction, social and health care, and banking and finance, to work in journalism, the law, the military sector and human rights activism.



## What is your current legal status (in your host country)?

Asylum-seeker	Refugee	Temporary resident	Permanent resident	Naturalised citizen	Other	Prefer not to say
23%	23%	1.5%	18.5%	17%	5%	12%

## How long have you been living in exile?

Less than a year	1–5 years	5–10 years	More than 10 years	No answer
14%	26%	15.5%	29%	15.5%



## 2. What were their reasons for leaving their home country?

The survey participants had left Saudi Arabia for a variety of reasons – and mostly for multiple reasons – but the most frequently mentioned were a lack of freedom and feelings of vulnerability because of their activism or that of family members, or because of their sexual orientation. A surprisingly high proportion cited domestic violence, and elsewhere in the survey it became apparent that it was the failure of the Saudi legal system, and even specialist domestic violence services, to provide protection that had driven victims to seek safety abroad.

These themes were further developed as participants were asked whether they had sought help with their problems from official bodies before leaving the kingdom. Nearly a quarter had done so, of whom only half received any response, and none of whom reported any satisfaction.

Relatively few, meanwhile, cited economic difficulties as a reason for leaving the country, and most, as reported in the previous section, had been working in Saudi Arabia.

The overwhelming majority believed they would not be safe returning to Saudi Arabia, even if the authorities gave them assurances of safety.





**What was your reason for leaving Saudi Arabia?**  
(participants could select more than one reason, and those who responded selected an average of 2.25 each)

A lack of political freedom	63%
A lack of religious freedom	49%
I was targeted/felt unsafe due to my sexual orientation	20%
I was targeted/felt unsafe due to my relative's activism	17%
Domestic violence	25%
Marital problems	2%
Discrimination faced (e.g. in employment or health)	20%
Economic difficulties	8%
Other (please specify)	22%

The “Other” category included a few going abroad to study, or mentioning gender dysphoria, but most of the “Other” respondents cited fears for their safety because of their political, human rights or women’s rights activism, or human rights violations generally.



While in Saudi Arabia, did you ever approach the Saudi authorities or any Saudi-based bodies for protection or assistance?

Yes	No	Prefer not to say
27%	73%	0%

Those who said they had been working in Saudi Arabia reported a wide range of occupations and employment, from commerce, education and administration, manufacturing and construction, social and health care, and banking and finance, to work in journalism, the law, the military sector and human rights activism.

If yes, who did you contact? (select all that apply) (see box below for descriptions of these bodies)

The Saudi Human Rights Commission (SHRC)	41%
The National Society for Human Rights (NSHR)	18%
The State Security Presidency (SSP)	12%
A charity	12%
Other (please specify)	59%

Under “Other”, the police were mentioned a number of times, as well as the Domestic Violence Reporting Centre, the Royal Diwan, the Ministry of Social Affairs, the respondent’s local government office and the American Embassy.



### **The Saudi Human Rights Commission (SHRC)**

The SHRC, set up in 2005, is officially responsible for promoting and protecting human rights in the country, including addressing human rights complaints, engaging in legislative work, and monitoring detention facilities.

### **The National Society for Human Rights (NSHR)**

Another government body officially established, in 2004, to promote and protect human rights.

### **The State Security Presidency (SSP)**

The SSP was created in 2017 by merging the counterterrorism and domestic intelligence services under one command, reporting to the king.

### **The Royal Diwan or Royal Court**

Acts as a liaison between the king and government bodies, and provides a channel through which citizens can raise complaints.

### **The Domestic Violence Reporting Centre**

An online and toll-free phone service provided by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Human Resources, offering help and protection.

Did you receive any response from the authorities?

Yes	No
50%	50%



## If yes, was their response helpful?

Yes	No
0%	100%

Here, the figures speak for themselves, but they were accompanied by a number of heartfelt and illuminating comments from the surveyed Saudi exiles. For example:



*“My report of domestic violence was ignored.”*

*“I called Human Rights several times, but unfortunately they informed my attackers, which made matters worse.”*

*“Because of friends’ experiences I knew the authorities would contact my family, so it wasn’t an option for me.”*

*“I was reported as a runaway by my male guardian (my stepdad). Even the courts do not assist in this... I knew if I called the police they would contact my guardian and just send me back.”*



## Woman who “run away”

Under the male guardianship system, women are legally obliged to “obey” male family members, and if they choose to leave the family home they can be reported to the authorities as having shown disobedience by “running away”. The police will often cooperate with the father, husband, brother or son to send the woman back home against her will, regardless of any abuse she may have suffered at their hands. She can also be punished with detention in a so-called Women’s Care Home – see our [briefing](#) and also our report on [Saudi prisons and detention centres](#) (pp. 40-43).



*“I’m queer, so I can’t turn to the authorities, we don’t have that privilege.”*

*“I don’t know of any Saudi-based body that can protect people from discrimination.”*

*“I’m constantly being threatened by my father, but I can’t seek protection because the law doesn’t recognise that I even have rights, and because of my father’s government connections.”*

*“They told me I had to report to the local police station, but I couldn’t, because I work in a different area during the week and that particular police station doesn’t operate at the weekend.”*



*“I contacted the police, the prosecution, the Ministry of Interior and the Royal Diwan without finding a solution, in fact they tried to lure us into going back.”*

*“They ignored the problem and just said ‘When you come back and are arrested we’ll tell you.’”*

*“They told the attackers that what they’d done was wrong, but didn’t protect me or do anything about the physical burns and psychological attacks on me.”*

*“First they cast doubt on the victim’s story, then they speculated that the perpetrator was under the influence of drugs or alcohol, and then I was told they couldn’t intervene unless the victim had suffered severe injury inflicted by a sharp instrument requiring admission to hospital etc., etc. In fact she’d been threatened at gunpoint and severely beaten, yet despite the marks and bruises to her face, in the absence of a medical report I got no further answer after that.”*

Do you believe you would be safe if you returned to Saudi Arabia now?

Yes	No
6.5%	93.5%



## If the Saudi authorities promised you safety, would you trust them?

Yes	No
3%	97%

The respondents' comments revealed feelings ranging from extreme caution to absolute conviction that returning to Saudi Arabia, if only for a short visit, would have dire consequences, especially if they had previously been critical of government policies or human rights violations. Some felt acutely vulnerable to potential repression by the authorities, while others were afraid of punishment from their own families, particularly fathers and (male) guardians. Several said the kingdom had no laws guaranteeing people's rights and liberties or protecting them from family abuse.

Here are some examples of the fears and scepticism they expressed:



*"I'm certain that I won't feel safe there. Maybe I won't be arrested, but I'll feel constantly under threat and vulnerable, with restrictions on my freedom."*

*"As someone from Qatif [in the Eastern Province], we are always looked at as criminals until proven otherwise. I am pretty sure I will be interrogated if I go back, with a high possibility of imprisonment."*



“

*“I’ll immediately be arrested because of appearing [in an online video] with my ID card, renouncing Islam and criticising government policies.”*

*“Certain execution.”*

*“I’ve been told that my name is on a ‘wanted’ list, and the government keeps hacking my phones.”*

*“I can go back and forth, as I don’t have any sort of criminal case against me (as far as I know), but I wouldn’t move back there.”*

Once again, the supplementary comments on these questions revealed a harsh assessment of the situation as the Saudi exiles see it. For example:

“

*“The Saudi government has a track record of arresting and curtailing the movement of many people to whom they’ve promised safety.”*

*“You can’t trust a criminal government that has no religious, legal or moral scruples.”*

*“Saudi Arabia doesn’t keep to its undertakings.”*

*“The Saudi authorities only understand the language of pressure and force.”*



“

*“They could only be trusted if they released all the prisoners of conscience and introduced laws providing protection.”*

*“They’ve punished and made an example of several emigrants for propaganda.”*



## **The case of Salma al-Shebab**

Many of the survey respondents will have been aware of the case of [Salma al-Shehab](#), a 34-year-old PhD student at the University of Leeds in the UK. In 2021, when she returned to Saudi Arabia to visit her family, she was arrested, interrogated for months, put on trial in the kingdom’s terrorist court, and ultimately sentenced to 27 years in prison for her social media activism in support of women’s rights and imprisoned Saudi human rights defenders. Her case, and others like it, strongly indicate that Saudi emigrés’ safety concerns may often be well-founded.



### 3. What are their experiences of living abroad?

Participants were asked about the difficulties they had experienced living abroad, both in their personal lives and in relation to their legal situation and career prospects. There were supplementary questions about their mental health and that of their close family members.

What challenges have you faced since leaving Saudi Arabia? select all that apply (respondents selected an average of 4.44 challenges each)

Finding affordable housing	34%
Finding employment	39%
Language and communication barriers	25%
Racism and discrimination	15%
Lack of social support	29%
Impact of disrupted education/schooling	22%
Lack of legal support and guidance in the host country	24%
Lack of communication with family	32%
Mental health issues, such as depression or post-trauma stress disorder (PTSD)	47%

Financial difficulties	53%
Residency insecurity (waiting for decision on asylum application)	31%
Cyberbullying/harassment from online trolls	34%
Cybersurveillance	44%
Other (please specify)	8%
None of the above	7%

“Other” problems that were mentioned included “fake investors”, issues over travel documents, and constant anxiety about potential threats from a male guardian still in Saudi Arabia.

Racism and discrimination, and language and communication barriers, were markedly less problematic for the diaspora Saudis than their financial and mental health issues. Despite the wealthy image of Saudi Arabia and its citizens, many exiles who may previously have had well-paid jobs and comfortable lifestyles now find themselves without work, or even permits to work, and in addition may have had their Saudi bank accounts frozen by the authorities, denying them access to their own funds. Cybersurveillance and harassment from online trolls were also significant issues for many Saudi exiles.



## What is your current employment status?

Employed (full-time)	32%
Employed (part-time)	5%
Self-employed	8%
Unemployed, but currently studying	11%
Unemployed, but I have a work permit	14%
Unemployed, and I do not have a work permit	15%
No answer	15%

Nearly half of the respondents said that they were working, at least part-time or for themselves, in a wide range of mainly professional jobs in sectors such as finance, healthcare, IT, the media and teaching or research. A significant minority (26%) said their current work bore no relation to their previous work in Saudi Arabia, but 32% had jobs that were at least partly related to their field of study.

## Have you or any close family members experienced any of the following?

Mental health conditions, as diagnosed by a professional	33%
Substance abuse problems including alcoholism or drug abuse	6%
Prosecution for breaking the law, in either your home country or your host country	9%

The most commonly mentioned mental health problems were depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and anxiety. A few respondents also mentioned ADHD, bipolar disorder, gender dysphoria and sleep problems. The only instances of lawbreaking elaborated in the comments section related to social media activity in Saudi Arabia; one respondent, for example was prosecuted for “Tweeting but all [charges] dropped”, while another was tried under the Anti-Cybercrime Law for activity on Twitter.

## Do you still have connections with friends and family inside Saudi Arabia?

Friends	Yes	43%	Family	Yes	38%
	To some extent	17%		To some extent	21%
	No	24%		No	29%
	Prefer not to say	16%		Prefer not to say	12%



### Do you feel a connection with other Saudi Arabians living abroad?

Yes	67%
No	16%
Prefer not to say	17%

### If yes, how well connected do you feel with other Saudi Arabians abroad?

Saudis are my main social circle	17%
I have a few Saudi acquaintances	42%
Not well connected	17%
I avoid them	5%
Prefer not to say	19%

## Have you engaged in any social or political activities related to Saudi Arabia while living in exile?

Yes	No	Prefer not to say
67%	24%	9%

Several respondents had reservations about meeting other diaspora Saudis, and commented that people left Saudi Arabia for different reasons and had different ideas and values. Some had become distinctly wary of their fellow Saudis in exile after bad experiences in the past, but others remained willing to cooperate where they had goals in common.



*“It depends what kind of person they are.”*

*“I mostly feel afraid.”*

*“After the hurt I’ve suffered from certain Saudi women in the diaspora, and unfortunately harassment from some of the men...”*

*“I don’t think every dissident is a genuine believer in democracy and citizen participation.”*

*“Some of them... I feel like they try to manipulate or control under a specific group.”*

A number of the survey participants had engaged in political activism while abroad, including demonstrations, attending human rights conferences, and social media activity. Some had taken part in coordinated actions, while others had pursued their own campaigns, with or without help and advice from other diaspora Saudis.

## 4. What are their thoughts about the current situation in Saudi Arabia?

Survey participants were asked a number of questions about their views on recent changes in Saudi Arabia, such as Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman’s Vision 2030 economic transformation programme, the hosting of major international cultural and sports events, and the state of human rights and civil liberties. Perhaps unsurprisingly, their answers were overwhelmingly negative. Starting with human rights:

Do you see a problem with the human rights situation in Saudi Arabia?

Yes	No	Don't know	Prefer not to say
91.5%	3.5%	0%	5%

Individual respondents commented on the absence of a constitution; the lack of popular participation, civil society and political and intellectual freedom; and the untrammelled power of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. They mentioned torture, various forms of discrimination, and use of the death penalty. One, however, commented that it was “the same as Qatar, the UAE and the whole region”.

If yes, do you think the current political leadership is working to address the issues?

Yes	No	Maybe	No answer
2%	84%	9%	5%





The respondents expressed much cynicism towards the government's reform agenda:



*“They’re actually the ones who have deliberately brought things to this bad state.”*

*“They might be working on some issues, but the urgency and immediacy seems to address things that make the government look good compared to the actual welfare of the people.”*

*“The citizen is the least of the government’s concerns... In their tyrannical understanding, citizens have no rights.”*

*“They’re working to cover up violations rather than remedying them.”*

*“Tackling rights issues is not a government priority, in fact they think speaking about them undermines the government’s prestige.”*

*“Saudi Arabia is unfortunately getting worse in terms of political and intellectual freedoms, and there isn’t even a glimmer of hope that things will improve any time soon.”*



### Do you believe Saudi Vision 2030 is reforming the human rights situation and the economy in Saudi Arabia?

Yes	No	No answer
2%	86%	12%

A number of respondents commented that the focus of Vision 2030 was economic transformation with an emphasis on attracting foreign investment and tourists, and had little or nothing, they claimed, to do with human rights. Several described it as “whitewashing”, “a con”, “media glitz without political rights”, or even “a means of numbing the people and stealing their budget”.

### How do you feel about international cultural and sporting events such as Expo 2030 Riyadh and the 2034 World Cup being held in Saudi Arabia?

Proud	3%
Unhappy	33%
Mixed feelings	32%
Indifferent	20%
No answer	12%



Many respondents were positive about the events themselves but cynical about the authorities' use of them to deflect attention from the kingdom's ongoing social, political and economic problems and, again, to cover up human rights violations. Several questioned the authorities' spending priorities, in one case arguing that the huge sums spent on sport and entertainment would be better spent on healthcare, education, and support for the unemployed and low-income families. One suggestion was that instead of criticising such events, Saudi NGOs abroad could try to find some way of vetting people taking part, or asking to accompany them to Saudi Arabia.

### Do you think Saudi Arabia needs some form of democratic transition?

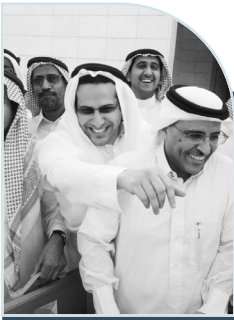
Yes	No	Don't know/Prefer not to say
90%	3	7%

### If yes, are you aware of any existing civil movement in Saudi Arabia working towards a democratic state? (of those who answered this question)

Yes	No
40%	60%

Some respondents were aware of the former Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association, which has won several international awards for its brave and pioneering work but was closed down by the Saudi authorities in 2013; and one mentioned a charity working with woman and child victims of violence. Several commented on the way the authorities have progressively clamped down on political and human rights activism of any sort.





## The Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association (ACPRA)

The Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association was established in October 2009 with the aim of promoting and safeguarding the fundamental human, civil and political rights of all Saudi citizens. It peacefully advocated for a constitutional monarchy, a universally elected parliament, an independent judiciary and the protection of fair trial rights in Saudi Arabia. ACPRA also documented human rights violations within the kingdom, helped victims to file legal claims against the officials responsible, and shared the information with foreign NGOs and the relevant UN Special Procedures. ACPRA was never legally recognised by the government, yet was only formally banned in 2013. All of its 11 members were prosecuted and severely punished by the Saudi authorities for their human rights activism and cooperation with United Nations human rights mechanisms.

Do you think Saudi activists living abroad can impact democracy-building in Saudi Arabia?

Yes	No	Don't know	Prefer not to say
59%	17%	19%	5%

Some of the comments in response to this question reflected differences between secular and religious understandings of democracy, as well as criticisms of certain opposition figures' approaches, as will be discussed later on in this report. Nevertheless, there were those who were optimistic about the potential impact diaspora Saudis could have.



## 5. What changes would need to take place in Saudi Arabia before diaspora Saudis would consider going back?

The survey questionnaire explored participants' intentions, plans and feelings about possibly returning to Saudi Arabia one day, and the changes that would have to take place before they would be willing or feel comfortable to return.

### Do you intend to return to Saudi Arabia at some time?

Yes	No	Don't know	Prefer not to say
14%	54%	29%	3%

### If not, why not?

Most of the answers to this question reflected personal safety concerns, fear and mistrust of the current Saudi government, and a perceived lack of legal protection for women and LGBT people. Some respondents expressed a dislike of Saudi society and the country generally, or simply felt settled in their new country and had no reason to go back, except perhaps to visit.

### If yes (intending to return to Saudi Arabia at some time), what steps if any have you taken towards returning?

Very few said they had done anything about going back, though one had withdrawn their asylum application, another had contacted the authorities for assurance that they would not be arrested if they visited the country, and one wanted to get a European passport first. Others said they were working for regime change.

What changes or reforms would you wish to see in Saudi Arabia before you go back? select all that apply (those who responded selected an average of 2.75 items each)

Political freedom (including freedom of association and assembly, and freedom of speech on- and offline) + Democratic transition and an independent judiciary	91%
Gender equality	54%
Improvements in employment opportunities and workers' rights	68%
Acceptance of the LGBT community	41%
Other (please specify)	21%

The “Other” changes wished for included: abolition of the male guardianship system and legal protection against violence; freedom of belief, including the freedom to have no belief; “ending the political exploitation of Islam”, the people having the right to self-determination; abolition of the death penalty; “recognition of gender dysphoria as an illness requiring therapy”, and an end to “foreign hegemony” over political decision-making.

Most participants said they would be interested (55%) or at least potentially interested (26%) to meet up with other Saudi emigrés for Saudi-related events. Similar numbers were interested (50%) or potentially interested (19%) to take part in follow-up activities after the survey, such as private meetings, events, podcasts or interviews. In addition to meetings and media activities like podcasts, some also indicated willingness to take part in demonstrations, sit-ins and protests as well as other civil and political action. The key issues of concern that they mentioned were freedom of expression, human rights including women’s rights and LGBT rights, and economic issues.

## B. Discussion

The diverse yet predominantly liberal social attitudes and political views revealed among the survey cohort must either be more typically held within Saudi Arabia than outside observers tend to realise, or else betray the influence of the respondents' experiences abroad. ALQST believes the former is more likely, since the survey's findings are largely consistent with ALQST's previous research and intelligence from sources on the ground inside Saudi Arabia, as well as the issues arising in its casework with Saudi asylum-seekers in Europe and North America. They therefore significantly reinforce ALQST's arguments for radical improvements to the kingdom's track record on human rights, and indicate a possible basis for collective advocacy by diaspora Saudis more widely.

To some extent the findings of the survey may have been slightly skewed by the sampling method adopted, in which participants were recruited largely through existing Saudi diaspora groups and networks, although the researchers took care to reach out as widely as possible, and in particular to ensure men and women were equally represented. Nevertheless, the substantial consensus found among the respondents was striking – the prevalence of fears for their safety; profound mistrust of the Saudi authorities; the personal sacrifices incurred by the decision to flee abroad, such as family separation; and the toll on their mental health.

Some of the main themes to emerge from the survey were:

**The utter lack of freedom in Saudi Arabia – freedom of expression, assembly and association, and religious and political freedoms**

“

*“There's a total lack of political and intellectual freedom, and the space for other freedoms is dependent on the government's point of view, not based on a constitution.”*



*“There are restrictions on everything – if you’re not with me, you’re against me. It’s not just criticism, your point of view on a subject is enough for a stream of accusations and maybe arrest on a charge of incitement etc.”*

*“Although the social situation has improved, the rights situation is worse on all levels – no transparency, no public participation in decision-making, accountability, legislation; no constitution, MBS has a free hand with all powers and authority and use of the death penalty and ongoing torture and various forms of discrimination, restrictions on freedoms, no civil society, etc.”*

*“Despite the image [high-profile sports and cultural events] present of openness and change, the basic rights to freedom of speech and expression are still being denied.”*

This is something ALQST has consistently reported on, particularly the authorities’ routine suppression of free expression both on- and offline

**The prevalence of domestic violence, and violence against women generally, and the authorities’ failure to provide legal protection for victims**







*“I’m constantly being threatened by my father, but I can’t seek protection because the law doesn’t recognise that I even have rights, and because of my father’s government connections.”*

*“There’s no guarantee of protection from the government, or even from my abuser, my guardian, in Saudi Arabia according to the law.”*

*“My report of domestic violence was ignored.”*

*“I was reported as a runaway by my male guardian (my Saudi stepdad)... Even though I was a born American citizen I was still subject to the male guardianship law... The courts do not assist in this – the guardian must agree to relinquish control. I knew if I called the police they would contact my guardian and just send me back. So as my stepdad is still alive and on the ground he is a legitimate risk to my safety along with my two Saudi brothers, who will undoubtedly seek retribution for my women’s rights activism.”*

**Severe discrimination on grounds of gender, sexual orientation and religion (notably against the minority Shia community) or lack of religious belief**





*“I don’t know of any Saudi-based body that can protect people from discrimination. Discrimination may not be on paper but it is the norm.”*

*“As someone from Qatif [in the largely Shia Eastern Province], we are always looked at as criminals until proven otherwise.”*

*“I’m queer, so I can’t turn to the authorities, we don’t have that privilege... I can’t trust them unless the law changes and laws are introduced to provide protection... [We] marginalised groups don’t have any space of our own, even within the mainstream opposition, but we have a voice and we will demand our freedom and our rights... Queer history is full of revolutions and our revolution is ongoing.”*

*“I don’t believe that Saudi will give freedom of speech or equality between the different classes among the population.”*

■ **Widespread fears for personal safety, from government bodies and family members alike, as illustrated by numerous comments quoted in the “Findings” section**

■ **Profound lack of trust in the Saudi authorities, including institutions that are supposed to promote human rights and protect victims**





*“Citizens are the least of the government’s concerns; in their tyrannical understanding citizens have no rights.”*

*“There are no rights for Saudis and the [Saudi Human Rights Commission] does nothing but spy on citizens for the government.”*

*“I called Human Rights several times, but unfortunately they informed my attackers, which made matters worse.”*

ALQST has repeatedly found that the main body mandated to safeguard human rights in the country, the Saudi Human Rights Commission (SHRC), operates instead as a tool for covering up the Saudi authorities’ violations. As highlighted in a report by MENA Rights Group and partner NGOs, the SHRC has acted with dishonesty towards many victims of abuse, including women’s rights activists subjected to torture and child defendants facing the death penalty.

**The Saudi authorities’ pursuit of Saudi emigrés and refugees through cybersurveillance and trolling, and pressure on their relatives back home in the kingdom**



*“I’ve been told that my name is on a ‘wanted’ list, and the government keeps hacking my phones.”*



## **Saudi cybersecurity attacks**

The Saudi authorities' sweeping repression has increasingly extended to the online space in recent years. The internet has been weaponised, not only inside the country but also outside, with the authorities infiltrating and using foreign companies to carry out spying and cyber surveillance.

In November 2019, two former employees of Twitter (since renamed "X") were charged in the United States with spying for the Saudi authorities by accessing the private data of Saudi dissidents using the platform, a breach believed to have led to the arrest of humanitarian worker Abdulrahman al-Sadhan, among others.

Another notorious case involved Israeli spyware company NSO Group. As highlighted by the Pegasus Project's findings published in July 2021, the Saudi authorities used NSO's highly invasive "Pegasus" spyware to launch cyberattacks against innocent activists abroad, in a bid to secretly gather and extract data. Known targets of the surveillance spyware have included ALQST's founder Yahya Assiri.

In light of such attacks and surveillance of online activity, Saudi citizens and residents returning to the country may find themselves at immediate risk, and potentially on the security services' arrivals watchlist at the airport.

**High levels of mental ill-health, trauma and post-traumatic stress among survey participants and their family members**

**Near-universal scepticism towards Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's economic Vision 2030 as a vehicle for political and human rights reform**



*“Everything to do with Vision 2030 is for show, to entice tourists and investors, but nothing is actually improving for women on the ground. Everything they say they do away with is only renamed and repackaged for show.”*

*“They might be working on some issues, but the urgency and immediacy seems to address things that make the government look good compared to the actual welfare of people.”*

*“Seems like whitewashing...”*

*“Vision 2030 doesn’t include giving the people any right of self-determination, or introducing a law of civil rights to curb the powers of absolute authority over individuals – so there’s no reform.”*

**Cynicism about the authorities’ use of cultural and sporting events like the 2034 World Cup to deflect attention from ongoing problems and rights violations**



“

*“The sums spent are excessive and should be invested on health, education, unemployment and the poor instead.”*

*“Although [such events] present an image of openness and change, basic rights such as freedom of expression are not part of the equation.”*

*“Happy with them at heart, but sad that they’re being used to cover up violations.”*

**The total inability of Saudi citizens to act or advocate for change inside their country under a highly centralised absolute monarchy**

“

*“The only movement with any reputation or influence was ACPRA [closed down by the authorities in 2013].”*

*“At the present time we have no way of protesting.”*

*“Rights are denied and calling for them is banned.”*



*“Saudi arrests any movement calling for a democratic state or political or even human rights.”*

*“In the past, yes, but everyone now is prevented from doing political activity and either detained or abroad or banned from travelling and writing, and there’s no one left inside who’s able to act because of the extreme repression.”*

*“The government criminalises any activism or political movement that wants more freedom and democracy, and employs plainclothes officers to spy on activists and feminists, and if they detect any action going on they launch waves of arrests and charge them with terrorism and disrupting national security so as to frighten everyone and so that there remains no form of political and human rights activity.”*

But are Saudis in exile any better placed to mobilise potential support for meaningful reform? The survey respondents’ views were mixed. Some were very positive, but there was clearly also a wide spectrum of approaches, from conservative to liberal and from religious to secular/constitutional:





*“At this time, a number of international events have proved to the world the extent of the repression Saudi citizens are living under... we have not been able to see justice in respect of victims, but we remain hopeful that change is coming, and the weapon is awareness.”*

*“Bold rhetoric is the solution as far as I’m concerned. They don’t speak out courageously enough, even the external opposition is afraid for its reputation and doesn’t want to offend the conservatives.”*

*“[It will take] large numbers and diverse activities and persistence...”*

*“...unity and pressure on the international community, and communicating with the [people] inside...”*

*“Every activist has a network of relationships in Saudi that they influence directly and indirectly.”*

*“Their passionate efforts demonstrate what they are striving for.”*

*“I think they have a powerful role.”*

*“I don’t think so. A lot of them talk about democracy without applying it in their own lives and dealings with other people. The vast majority only believe in the democracy that accords with fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence) texts by the remnants of Islamist groups. No one in the opposition reflects a desire to apply real democracy that protects minorities and defends their rights. Only certain Saudi people talk about this, mostly those whose friends are atheists and LGBT.”*



# Conclusions and Recommendations

Major reforms would evidently be needed before the majority of Saudi nationals abroad would consider returning to the kingdom, given their fears for their safety and profound mistrust of the authorities. First and foremost would have to be tangible guarantees of free speech, freedom of opinion and expression, and freedom of assembly and association. Legislation guaranteeing civil and political liberties and providing protection for vulnerable minorities and victims of abuse, particularly women, would need to be passed and upheld by an independent judiciary. Several survey participants called for a civil constitution and some said releasing prisoners of conscience would be the clearest evidence of the authorities' good faith.

These conclusions are largely consistent with ALQST's previous research and contacts on the ground inside Saudi Arabia. This may be explained by the fact that a large proportion of those taking part in the survey, a highly educated and articulate cohort, are in contact with family and friends still in the kingdom, but have greater freedom outside it to express their thoughts.

The survey's findings strongly reinforce ALQST's repeated calls for wholesale reform and guarantees of basic rights for all Saudi citizens and residents without distinction, in a legal framework aligned with international human rights standards and implemented and enforced by a judiciary fully independent of the governing authorities. For more information about all aspects of the current human rights situation in Saudi Arabia, please visit ALQST's [website](#), where you can find its latest [Annual Report](#) and periodic reports on special issues.

Meanwhile, the survey also suggests actions that the international community – governments, civil society, business leaders, sports and cultural celebrities – could take to support Saudi Arabians in exile and their earnest desire for reforms at home:

- Saudi nationals seeking asylum or at risk of deportation should be protected and their claims of threats to their safety should be taken seriously.
- Transnational repression in the form of cybersurveillance and cyberbullying should be addressed.
- Civil associations of Saudi emigrés and their allies deserve support in their advocacy for basic human rights and political and civil liberties in the Saudi kingdom.
- In order to tackle the root causes of Saudis fleeing their country, the work of human rights organisations like ALQST, and advocates at the United Nations and with governments and parliaments everywhere, must be strengthened and widely supported.





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