



The Soaring Fantasy, The Harsh Reality: Human Rights in Saudi Arabia in 2023

ALQST Annual Report
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Introduction

The glaring contrast between, on the one hand, the multibillion-dollar, video-game-inspired vanity projects of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and, on the other, the growing numbers of Saudi citizens fleeing the kingdom in search of freedom and safety, grows ever more stark.

In 2023 the Saudi leadership intensified its efforts to create the narrative of technologically innovative social and economic transformation, and to pursue control, through several ambitious purchases, of globally popular sports like football and golf. Yet behind the glittering projections of cyber-smart cities, endless carbon capture and improbable ski resorts in the desert – seen by others as unrealistic, absurd and even dystopian – the trampling of human rights and wholesale repression of the Saudi people continued as before.

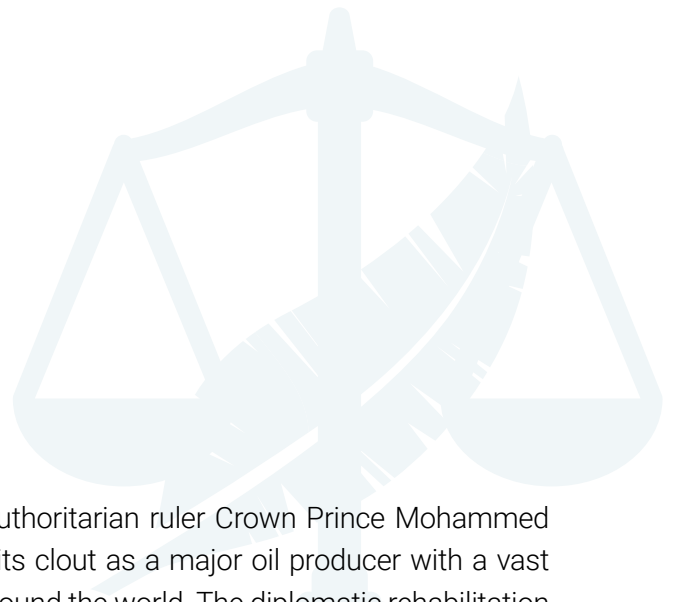
Numerous activists and private individuals were arbitrarily arrested and slapped with jaw-droppingly severe jail sentences – and in one case the death penalty – for peaceful social media activity. Many more were cruelly and arbitrarily banned from travelling outside the country. Women, despite vaunted reforms, remain second-class citizens.

The ruthless silencing of independent voices, and the impossibility for Saudi citizens to voice their opinions and priorities for public policy and stand up for their rights, prompted ALQST, at its annual Human Rights Day conference in 2023, to look at the potential for Saudi activists working abroad to further the human rights agenda. Here, ALQST plays a vital role because of its almost unique ability both to gather and analyse information about conditions on the ground in Saudi Arabia and to convey the situation in all its harsh reality to the outside world. In this year's Annual Report we have included examples of international media coverage where ALQST's research has been an important, or even primary, source of trusted information.

In today's challenging global situation, it is more important than ever for the international community – politicians, business leaders and respected figures in the world of sport and entertainment, as well as the general public – to take principled action wherever they can to champion human rights, and to resist the Saudi leadership's efforts to whitewash their deplorable record.



Executive Summary



Under the increasingly self-confident leadership of its authoritarian ruler Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 2023 used its clout as a major oil producer with a vast sovereign wealth fund to project and build its influence around the world. The diplomatic rehabilitation of Mohammed bin Salman, largely ostracised since the state-sponsored murder of dissident journalist Jamal Khashoggi in October 2018, was virtually complete by the end of 2023, and Western arms transfers were renewed despite the conflict in Yemen not yet being resolved. Meanwhile, the Saudi state made massive strategic investments in popular international sports and entertainment, notably football and golf, through the Public Investment Fund (PIF) controlled by the crown prince. Human rights campaigners have therefore been broadening their appeals to the international community to include business leaders and celebrities in the world of sport and entertainment, in addition to politicians and the general public, to do all they can to resist Saudi “sportswashing” and champion human rights.

The absence of fundamental laws continues to create a legal vacuum and legal uncertainty for Saudi citizens and residents. The authorities claim that jurisdiction in the kingdom is based on Sharia (Islamic law), as interpreted by Saudi religious scholars; and the country has no formal constitution or criminal code. The draconian Counter-Terrorism and Anti-Cybercrime Laws are routinely used to criminalise acts that fall under the rights to freedom of opinion, expression, peaceful assembly and association.

Over the course of 2023, the Saudi authorities carried out numerous acts of collective punishment, intimidation and reprisal in the form of harassment and arrests of family members of activists and dissidents, and transnational repression in the form of extradition, travel bans or deportation. They also continued in 2023 to arbitrarily arrest people who peacefully exercised their right to freedom of expression and other fundamental rights, adding to the many individuals already behind bars for peacefully exercising these rights.

Throughout the year the Saudi courts, notorious for their rampant abuses and disregard of legal safeguards, continued to hand down decades-long prison sentences to peaceful activists and even lesser-known individuals in an increasingly brazen and irrational manner, adding to the countless others already serving lengthy prison terms in Saudi Arabia for peaceful activity, especially online. The kingdom’s first known death sentence for social media activity was handed down in July 2023.

ALQST documented further examples in 2023 of the Saudi authorities’ dangerous and vindictive handling of certain prisoners whose lives they recklessly, if not deliberately, place at risk. Prisoners

of conscience sometimes suffer so much ill-treatment and harassment in jail that they are driven to stage individual or collective hunger strikes to demand their rights and seek improvements in conditions. 2023 saw further examples of such courageous protests.

Several more prisoners of conscience were released in 2023 after completion of their prison sentences, but once again only on strict conditions that routinely included arbitrary bans on travel, work and social media activity. The Saudi authorities also continued to impose arbitrary travel bans on detainees' family members, preventing them too from leaving the country, in a form of collective punishment that contravenes both international conventions and the kingdom's own legislation. Appeals to the official Saudi Human Rights Commission to help lift such travel bans fell on deaf ears.

The Saudi state executed at least 172 individuals during 2023, including dozens on terrorism charges that in some cases included taking part in protests. Meanwhile, further death sentences were upheld for crimes allegedly committed by minors, placing several at imminent risk of execution following grossly unfair trials, and destroying the authorities' claims to have discontinued use of the death penalty for juvenile offenders.

During 2023, the Saudi authorities continued their vicious campaign of arrests and prosecutions against members of the Huwaitat tribe for protesting against forcible eviction from their homes in the northwest of the Saudi kingdom to make way for the planned Neom megacity project. In February 2023, ALQST published [*The Dark Side of Neom: Expropriation, expulsion and prosecution of the region's inhabitants*](#), a detailed report based on first-hand testimonies from victims and witnesses as well as open-source data, which paints a disturbing picture of the serious human rights violations being committed in connection with Neom.

The legal framework affecting the lives of women in Saudi Arabia in 2023 continued to be shaped by the Personal Status (or Family) Law, which, despite being touted by the authorities as a major reform, in fact entrenches many pernicious features of the traditional male guardianship system. The Saudi nationality law also continued to discriminate against women despite a minor technical amendment in early 2023. Meanwhile, women human rights defenders, women's rights activists, and even private individuals simply expressing support for women's rights continued to be targeted by the authorities for arrest and prosecution.

Despite some limited reforms in recent years, Saudi Arabia's notorious *kafala* (sponsorship) system remained substantially intact in 2023, with migrant workers and domestic workers in particular continuing to suffer routine abuse. A new law for domestic workers, announced on 2 October 2023 and due to come into effect on 21 September 2024, will offer several protections, if implemented. Meanwhile, the authorities ramped up their crackdown on Ethiopian migrants, with mass killings at the Saudi-Yemen border.

The Annual Report concludes with a set of recommendations for both the international community and the Saudi authorities, and a timeline of human-rights related events in Saudi Arabia in 2023.



Saudi Arabia in the World



Under the increasingly self-confident leadership of its authoritarian ruler Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, in 2023 the kingdom of Saudi Arabia used its clout as a major oil producer with a vast sovereign wealth fund to project and build its influence in a multipolar world. The kingdom's cooperation with Vladimir Putin's Russia over oil policy, and with the emerging economic power of China over technoscientific innovation, has arguably weakened the leverage of its traditional allies in the West on human rights issues – which have already all too often been sacrificed to other political and commercial goals. The diplomatic rehabilitation of Mohammed bin Salman, largely ostracised since the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in October 2018, was virtually complete by the end of 2023, and Western arms transfers were renewed despite the conflict in Yemen not yet being resolved. Meanwhile, the Saudi state made massive strategic investments in popular international sports and entertainment, notably in football and golf, through the Public Investment Fund (PIF) controlled by the crown prince.

Diplomatic rehabilitation of Mohammed bin Salman almost complete, but not unchallenged

As Saudi Arabia persistently sought to assert itself as a key player in regional and world affairs, successfully winning hosting rights to a number of prestigious international events, 2023 saw the almost complete diplomatic rehabilitation of the kingdom's de facto ruler, Mohammed bin Salman. He had been largely shunned by world leaders after the state-sponsored murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in 2018 but was already being welcomed once again in foreign capitals. Saudi Arabia's role as a key oil producer helped to accelerate this trend during the energy crisis caused by the Russian war in Ukraine. In June 2023, Mohammed bin Salman travelled to France to meet President Emmanuel Macron, ahead of the Summit for a New Global Financial Pact, despite civil society organisations including ALQST [writing](#) to Macron urging him to consider the widespread human rights violations occurring in the kingdom. A month earlier, Canada and Saudi Arabia had agreed to restore diplomatic ties after a five-year dispute over the jailing of Saudi women activists.



Saudi Arabia, Canada agree to restore full diplomatic ties (DW)

The crown prince's planned [visit](#) to the United Kingdom in the autumn, which would have marked his first since the Khashoggi murder, was ultimately postponed.

In the face of this abandonment by Western leaders of their boycott of the crown prince, there have been efforts by some parliamentarians to question their governments' policies and call for a change of course. In the United States, in the face of President Joe Biden's [empty call](#) to re-evaluate US-Saudi ties, senators put forward a [resolution](#) requesting a report on human rights conditions in Saudi Arabia. In Germany, several members of the Bundestag (parliament) have [adopted](#) Saudi human rights defenders as part of the Bundestag's "Parliamentarians Protect Parliamentarians" programme, following extensive advocacy efforts by ALQST. The programme's aim is to protect the rights of persecuted human rights defenders around the world by drawing the attention of key political decision-makers to their plight.

At the United Nations, during sessions of the Human Rights Council (HRC) over the course of 2023, several states once again [drew attention](#) to ongoing human rights abuses in Saudi Arabia. Ahead of Saudi Arabia's fourth cycle of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) in 2024, ALQST [made](#) three submissions to the HRC, documenting the deteriorating human rights situation in the kingdom since the last UPR in 2018. A coalition of human rights NGOs including ALQST also drew up a list of key recommendations in preparation for Saudi Arabia's UPR, put forward during the UPR pre-session on 1 December 2023. If promoted by member states and accepted by Saudi Arabia, these recommendations have the potential to bring about significant change.

Renewed Western arms transfers despite ongoing war in Yemen

Saudi Arabia and its coalition allies in the long-standing war in Yemen continued to receive military assistance and equipment from Western governments throughout 2023. The United States is by far the biggest supplier of arms to Saudi Arabia, but military supplies from Europe are also significant. On 6 June 2023 the UK's High Court [rejected](#) a case brought by Campaign Against Arms Trade (CAAT) seeking to overturn the government's resumption of arms sales to Saudi Arabia for use in the war in Yemen. In July, the German government [agreed](#) to soften its position on arms exports to Saudi Arabia, while continuing to block deliveries of Eurofighter jets. And in the United States, where, despite the Biden administration's welcome suspension of offensive arms sales to Saudi Arabia in February 2021, other arms sales have continued, a potential new \$582 million deal arms sale was approved in December.

Massive investment in global sport and entertainment

During the year, the Saudi authorities scaled up their strategy of investing intensively in sports and entertainment, often via the Public Investment Fund (PIF), Saudi Arabia's sovereign wealth fund, in what is widely seen as an effort to bolster their image and gain soft power around the world. This is particularly evident in the world of football, which in 2023 saw a series of high-profile international players sign lucrative deals with Saudi Arabian football clubs, the four largest of which had just been acquired by the PIF.





As repression grows in Saudi Arabia, so too does investment in sports (CBS)

On 31 October 2023, Saudi Arabia was confirmed as the sole bidder to host the 2034 FIFA World Cup. As a consequence of FIFA's policy of rotating World Cup hosting rights around the regions of the world, bids for the 2034 tournament were restricted to countries from Asia and Oceania, with Saudi Arabia the only country to make a submission. However, this unchallenged bid from Saudi Arabia has raised questions about FIFA's commitment to human rights. Earlier in the year, FIFA had come under criticism for awarding "Visit Saudi", the state tourism authority, sponsorship rights to the 2023 Women's World Cup; it reversed this decision in March.

Two years on since the PIF takeover of Newcastle United Football Club in the UK, criticism from [civil society](#) and fan groups has continued to grow. Ahead of the start of the 2023-24 English Premier League season in August, ALQST and several other Gulf-focused human rights NGOs [wrote](#) to the Premier League and the UK government to express their deep concern over the growing trend of Gulf state ownership of Premier League clubs, calling for such ownership to be prohibited and phased out of English football. On 5 September 2023, ALQST's Head of Monitoring and Advocacy, Lina Alhathloul, visited Newcastle and [met](#) local councillors, the media and football fans to talk about Saudi Arabia's ownership of the football club, urging them to speak out about human rights violations by the Saudi authorities. Her visit received wide attention.



'Fans have power' - Newcastle faithful urged to speak up against Saudi regime (The Guardian)

The Saudi authorities have employed similar tactics in a variety of popular sports worldwide, including Formula 1 motor racing and golf. This year's Saudi Arabian Grand Prix, the third F1 race in the kingdom, [took place](#) in the city of Jeddah from 17 to 19 March as part of a lucrative 15-year deal. F1's CEO Stefano Domenicali has repeatedly defended holding the race in Saudi Arabia, insisting that it can be an agent of "positive change", though there has been no evidence that the sport has done anything to curb the ongoing and intensifying repression in Saudi Arabia.

On 6 June, a merger (still under negotiation) was announced between PIF-backed LIV Golf and the PGA Tour, following a nearly year-long litigation battle between the two organisations and giving the Saudi investment fund unprecedented influence over the sport. On 13 September, in testimony before the US Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, Human Rights Watch [called](#) on the US authorities to investigate and regulate sovereign wealth funds like Saudi Arabia's PIF that have been linked to human rights abuses.





“Money Has Won”: Saudi Rights Activist Says PGA-LIV Golf Merger Gives MBS More Power & Influence (*Democracy Now*)

The PIF is inseparable from the Saudi state and is linked to abuses on the ground

Although the English Premier League allowed the PIF takeover of Newcastle United on the basis that it had “received legally binding assurances that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia will not control Newcastle United Football Club”, the PIF is in fact inseparable from the Saudi state:

- It has been chaired by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman since 2015.
- In a video [interview](#), PIF Governor Yasir al-Rumayyan states that decisions taken by the PIF Board can be overruled by the king if its chair, the crown prince, does not agree with them.
- During its legal dispute with the PGA Tour, LIV-Golf’s lawyers described the PIF as “a sovereign instrumentality of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia”.

As such, the PIF is complicit in the authorities’ abuses, as well as being directly linked to human rights abuses on the ground, including:

- the forced displacement of thousands of local residents to make way for the PIF’s Neom smart city megaproject; and
- the 2018 murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, with the PIF providing the aircraft that transported his assassins.

In the field of entertainment and culture, on 28 November the Bureau International des Expositions (BIE) elected Saudi Arabia to host World Expo 2030. NGOs had [urged](#) the BIE to exclude Saudi Arabia’s candidacy, in light of its abysmal human rights record, both past and present. And when Saudi Arabia hosted the Soundstorm dance music festival in Riyadh from 16 to 18 December, some of the global music superstars participating, including Scottish DJ Calvin Harris, were [called out](#) by human rights groups for agreeing to perform.



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 has no formal constitution, only a Basic Law of Governance that fails to embody fundamental rights and freedoms. Moreover, the kingdom does not have a criminal code but instead leaves legal interpretation to the discretion of judges. This means that the legal definition of crimes, as well as the determination and severity of their punishments, rests on the judges' discretionary interpretation, 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 (US\$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.

Meanwhile, 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](#)).

Reprisal Arrests and Transnational Repression



Over the course of 2023, the Saudi authorities carried out numerous acts of collective punishment, intimidation and reprisal in the form of harassment and arrests of family members of activists and dissidents, or extradition, travel bans or deportation. They also continued to arbitrarily arrest people who peacefully exercised their right to freedom of expression and other fundamental rights, adding to the many individuals already behind bars for exercising these rights.

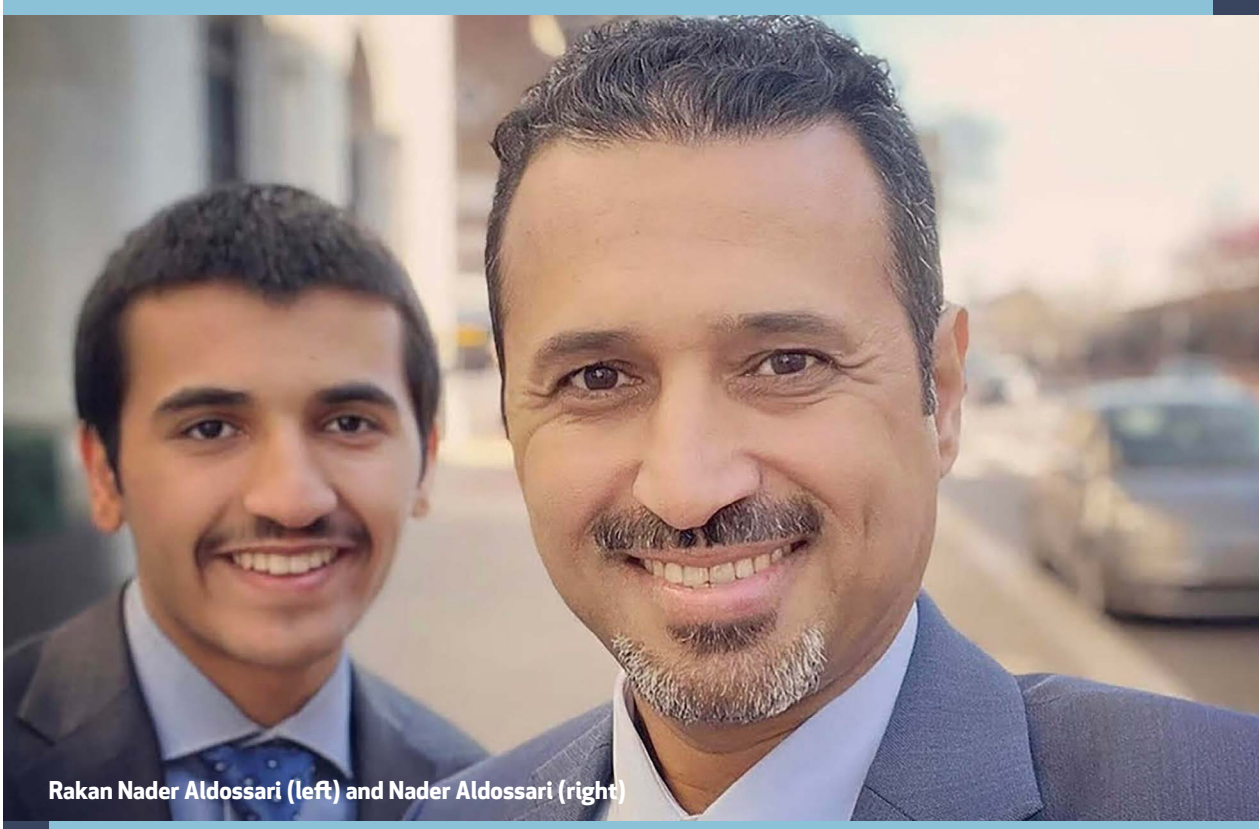
Arrests of family members as acts of intimidation and reprisals

The Saudi authorities' repression of those who have fallen victim to their wrath often extends beyond the individuals themselves to targeting their family members with measures such as travel bans (see "Conditional Releases and Travel Bans", [page 31](#)), arrests and extradition, practices that continued in 2023. In April and May 2023, the Saudi authorities [detained](#) five family members of US citizens **Nader Aldossari** and his then 15-year-old son **Rakan Nader Aldossari**, in apparent retaliation for the father's commercial lawsuit against the Saudi government. On 9 April, security forces detained **Nayef Turki Aldossari**, an uncle of Rakan Aldossari, and on 11 May they detained four further family members: Rakan Aldossari's uncles **Salman Turki Aldossari** and **Sultan Turki Aldossari**; an aunt; and his grandfather's wife, **Muneerah Mohammed al-Qahtani**, a Kuwaiti citizen. According to family members, they are detained in Riyadh's Malaz Prison in poor conditions, some in cold cells without blankets or proper beds. On 12 July, the family learned that the Saudi prosecutor's office had referred their case to the Specialised Criminal Court (SCC).

Nader and Rakan Aldossari left Saudi Arabia in 2021, and their relatives are apparently being detained and prosecuted in an effort to coerce them to return. Nader Aldossari has said that interrogators have made it clear to the detained family members that they will not be released unless he and his son return to Saudi Arabia, where they face arrest and prosecution in relation to his long-standing private commercial dispute with the Saudi authorities.



Saudi Arabia detains relatives of US citizen over lawsuit, rights groups say (*Reuters*)



Rakan Nader Aldossari (left) and Nader Aldossari (right)

Collective punishment of the al-Jabri family

Another example of family members being arbitrarily arrested and prosecuted as a form of reprisal in recent years is the case of the al-Jabri family. In March 2020, the Saudi authorities 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, to return to Saudi Arabia from exile. The two siblings were held incommunicado for several months, and eventually brought to trial in September 2020. Two months later, following a grossly unfair trial held in secret, a Saudi criminal court sentenced Omar and Sarah to nine and six and a half years in prison respectively, charging them with “attempting escape”. The ruling was upheld in December that year. In January 2021, Omar and Sarah were transferred from secret prisons to Al-Ha’ir and Malaz Prisons in Riyadh.

Omar and Sarah had been targeted by the Saudi authorities from as early as 2017, including being subjected to an arbitrary travel ban, interrogation, and having their assets frozen, in a clear act of reprisal for their relationship with their father. Saad al-Jabri was a senior adviser to former Crown Prince Mohammed bin Nayef, who was deposed following the accession of the present crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman. In August 2020, al-Jabri brought a US lawsuit against the crown prince, claiming that a Saudi hit squad had been sent to kill him soon after the Jamal Khashoggi murder in October 2018.

Extradition

Another measure that the Saudi authorities use as part of a pattern of intimidation and reprisals, extending their repression beyond the kingdom's borders, is extradition. This sometimes involves bringing fabricated criminal charges against individuals abroad.

Saudi national **Hassan al-Rabea**, who had arrived in Morocco in June 2022, was arrested at Marrakesh airport on 14 January 2023 following the issuance by the Council of Arab Interior Ministers of a provisional arrest warrant at the request of Saudi Arabia. Al-Rabea was said to be wanted on charges of “collaboration with terrorists by having them agree and collaborate with him to get him outside of Saudi Arabia in an irregular fashion”, based on Article 38 of the Saudi Counter-Terrorism Law. The punishment for such an offence would be a prison sentence of between 10 to 20 years. On 6 February, al-Rabea was extradited from Morocco despite repeated civil society [calls](#) for his release and non-extradition to Saudi Arabia, where he faced credible risks of persecution and other serious harm, including a risk of torture, for reasons related to his religious beliefs and his family's history of political protests. Following his forced return, he was detained and kept forcibly disappeared for months, apparently as part of a pattern of reprisals against the al-Rabea family.

Al-Rabea and his family belong to the Shia minority, which the Saudi authorities have historically discriminated against and subjected to persecution. Hassan al-Rabea's brother Munir is wanted by the authorities for allegedly protesting in al-Awamiyah in 2011, and his brother Ali Mohammed is currently in detention facing the death penalty following his sentencing in November 2022. Two of al-Rabea's cousins, Hussein al-Rabea and Ahmed al-Rabea, were executed on April 23, 2019, in a mass execution of 37 men, 33 of them Shia, who had been convicted following unfair trials for various alleged crimes, including protest-related offences, espionage, and terrorism. Hassan al-Rabea remains in detention, awaiting trial.

Saudi Arabia's abuse of Interpol procedures

In recent years, the Saudi authorities have attempted to use Interpol mechanisms to target opponents around the world and keep them in perpetual fear of arbitrary arrest. In their strenuous attempts to extradite former Saudi government official Saad al-Jabri from Canada, they requested an Interpol diffusion (an alert sent out to other countries' law enforcement agencies) but Interpol reportedly rejected the request as being politically motivated and in violation of Interpol's rules. We are aware of other potential Saudi victims of this abuse of the Interpol system, who are subject to seemingly baseless Interpol requests for their arrest outside the kingdom.



Saudi citizens seeking asylum abroad

Amid mounting repression in recent years, increasing numbers of Saudis have left the country and sought asylum abroad in order to avoid arbitrary arrest, prosecution and other abuses. Even outside the country, however, they often continue to face repression from the Saudi authorities by transnational means including digital and physical surveillance, threats and defamation. A recent example is **Rabih Alenezi**, a former Saudi police colonel who fled to the United Kingdom seeking political asylum in March 2023, after being ordered to carry out human rights violations. Other Saudi nationals to have fled Saudi Arabia in recent years include **Nasser al-Qarni**, son of detained preacher Awadh al-Qarni, and **Fouz al-Otaibi**, sister of fellow social media activist Manahel al-Otaibi. Both left in 2022, and are seeking asylum in the UK.



Threatened Saudi dissident told to live like Edward Snowden by Met police
(The Guardian)

Meanwhile, Saudi citizens who flee Saudi Arabia and seek asylum abroad can risk being deported back to the country. One such example is Saudi activist **Abdulrahman al-Khalidi**, who was forced to leave Saudi Arabia in 2013 due to his peaceful online activity. After eight years of exile in Turkey, al-Khalidi left that country and applied for asylum in Bulgaria on 23 October 2021; he was arrested two days later. His asylum application was then rejected, based on the flawed assessment that Saudi Arabia had “taken measures to democratise society”. Al-Khalidi’s appeal against the rejection of his asylum claim was also rejected by the Administrative Court in Sofia on 20 February 2023. He then appealed to the Administrative Supreme Court, which on 27 September sent the case back to the



Abdulrahman al-Khalidi

lower court for retrial. His appeal therefore remains pending, and he remains at risk of deportation back to Saudi Arabia, where his well-being and safety would not be assured.

Other arbitrary arrests

In 2023 the Saudi authorities continued to carry out arbitrary arrests of people exercising their right of free expression in the country. In May, as part of an ongoing campaign of persecution against members of the Huwaitat tribe (see “Forced Evictions and Displacement”, [page 41](#)), the authorities re-arrested **Ibrahim Sabah al-Amiri al-Huwaiti**, a man in his 70s who had been forcibly evicted from his home in the village of Sharma to make way for the huge state-backed Neom development project. He was first arrested in 2021 and spent three months in prison under investigation, before being released without charge.

On 1 August, the authorities arrested **Mohammed Alhaji**, a prominent scholar and media figure who holds a PhD in Behavioural and Social Sciences from Temple University and presents a podcast on documentary channel Thmanyah. He was released on 15 August, and the reasons for his arrest remain unknown.

News also emerged during the year of the fate of **Tariq bin Aziz**, arrested on 19 May 2021 and subsequently sentenced to a one-year prison term on charges under the Anti-Cybercrime Law that included “supporting homosexuality and advocating for homosexual rights” and possessing “indecent” photos. Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people face discrimination and stigmatisation in Saudi Arabia and are at risk of criminalisation if they express their sexual orientation or gender identity. Bin Aziz has since left Saudi Arabia, following his release.

Gross violations in connection with new anti-drug campaign

In April 2023, the Ministry of Interior launched a ferocious [anti-drug campaign](#) called “On the Lookout”, which grants security forces sweeping powers to crack down on suspected drug users, regardless of the quantities involved. There have been reports of widespread violations in relation to the campaign, including indiscriminate mass raids and arrests, and detainees being held incommunicado. Historically, Saudi Arabia has frequently executed people for drugs-related offences, among them migrant workers, and after an informal 22-month moratorium it resumed this practice in November 2022 (see “Use of the Death Penalty”, [page 36](#)).



Unfair Trials and Harsh Sentences

2023 picked up from where 2022 left off, with the Saudi authorities escalating their crackdown on free speech, especially online. Throughout the year the Saudi courts, notorious for their rampant abuses and disregard of legal safeguards, continued to hand down decades-long prison sentences to peaceful activists, and even lesser-known individuals, in an increasingly brazen and irrational manner, adding to the countless others already serving lengthy prison terms in Saudi Arabia for peaceful activity. The kingdom's first known death sentence for social media activity was handed down in July 2023.

A selective list of Saudi prisoners of conscience serving long jail sentences for peaceful online activity

Name	Occupation	Date of arrest	Prison sentence
Abdullah Jelan	University graduate	12 May 2021	10 years
Manal al-Gafiri	School student	2022	18 years
Abdulrahman al-Sadhan	Humanitarian worker	12 March 2018	20 years
Dawood al-Ali	Blogger	December 2020	25 years
Salma al-Shehab	PhD student	15 January 2021	27 years
Sara al-Jaar	Medical student	not known	27 years
Fatima al-Shawarbi	not known	September 2020	30 years and six months
Osama Khaled	Writer, translator and computer programmer	2020	32 years
Sukaynah al-Aithan	not known	not known	40 years
Nourah Saeed al-Qahtani	Mother and housewife	4 July 2021	45 years

In one egregious case, on 25 January 2023 Saudi Arabia's Specialised Criminal Court (SCC) [resentenced](#) mother of two **Salma al-Shehab**, a PhD student at the University of Leeds in the UK, to 27 years in prison and a travel ban of the same length. This was a minor reduction from the 34-



Salma al-Shehab

year term ludicrously imposed on her in August 2022 after she appealed her original sentence of six years. All the charges related to her social media activity, including retweeting and sharing posts on Twitter in support of women's rights activists such as Loujain al-Hathloul. Al-Shehab's conviction followed a grossly unfair trial. On 18 January, the Supreme Court had quashed the Appeal Court's ruling and referred the case back to the SCC for retrial, during which al-Shehab sought to address the charges against her but was denied the right to speak. The initial charges against her under the Anti-Cybercrime Law were dropped, but the SCC once again heard charges under the equally draconian Counter-Terrorism Law. On 7 July, following a complaint jointly submitted by ALQST for Human Rights, Democracy for the Arab World, The Freedom Initiative, Human Rights Foundation and MENA Rights Group, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention [issued](#) an Opinion qualifying the detention of al-Shehab and Nourah al-Qahtani (who was sentenced to 45 years in prison) as arbitrary, and called for their release.



UN report calls on Saudi Arabia to release 2 women jailed over tweets, alleging rights abuses (AP)

Over the course of 2023, the SCC handed down heavy jail terms to a number of other individuals, including many women, over their peaceful activity online. At around the time of al-Shehab's resentencing, **Sukaynah al-Aithan** was handed a 40-year prison term. In March, al-Aithan, al-Shehab and six other women went on hunger strike in protest against their unjust detention and sentencing (see "Prisoners and Detainees at Risk", [page 28](#)).

On 2 February, the SCC Appeal Court upheld prison sentences ranging from 10 to 18 years on ten Nubian Egyptians, for organising a peaceful commemorative event. They were initially sentenced in October 2022, charged with spreading false and malicious rumours on social media, establishing an unlicensed association, and supporting a terrorist group.

On 8 February, the SCC Appeal Court increased **Saad Ibrahim al-Madi**'s sentence from 16 years and three months to 19 years, in addition to a travel ban of the same length. Al-Madi, 72, who holds dual Saudi and US citizenship, was initially sentenced in October 2022, on charges relating to tweets "undermining the security of the state". He was subsequently released from prison in March 2023 (see "Prisoners and Detainees Released Under Continuing Restrictions", [page 31](#)).

"Jailed for a tweet"

The Saudi authorities' determination to suppress free speech online was brazenly laid bare in a chilling broadcast on 16 March 2023, now deleted following a backlash on Twitter, in which state-run TV channel Al Saudiya interviewed a man jailed for a single tweet that he "hadn't expected" could land him in prison.

The Thursday night programme "Blind Spot" interviewed five social media users now in prison for cybercrime offences, including one man – unidentified and shown only in silhouette, to a soundtrack of sinister music – jailed for a single tweet that he had believed to be innocent. He now realised, he told the interviewer, that what he thought was mere "criticism" was a criminal offence.

Article 6 of Saudi Arabia's 2007 Anti-Cybercrime Law sets a penalty of up to five years in prison and/or a fine of three million riyals (\$800,000) for vaguely defined cybercrimes including "the production, preparation, transmission, or storage of material impinging on public order, religious values, public morals, or privacy, through an information network or computer". The anonymous interviewee added (and the interviewer clarified) that where "incitement" was involved the sentence could go up to 15 years.

In mid-2023, the SCC Appeal Court handed down a jail term of 30 years and six months, to be followed by a travel ban of the same length, to **Fatima al-Shawarbi** for her peaceful activism on Twitter through an anonymous account. Al-Shawarbi was arrested in September 2020 and later charged by the SCC in relation to tweets defending prisoners of conscience, against forced displacement, and in solidarity with the unemployed. She is currently serving her sentence at the Mabaheth prison in Dammam.



A Saudi woman was given 30 years in prison for criticizing the Neom megacity project on Twitter (*Business Insider*)



Mohammed al-Ghamdi

In a further escalation of its punitive approach to free expression, on 10 July 2023 the SCC sentenced 54-year-old retired teacher **Mohammed al-Ghamdi** to death, the first known death sentence issued in Saudi Arabia solely for social media activity (see “Use of the Death Penalty”, [page 40](#)). In August, the SCC sentenced 18-year-old secondary school student **Manal al-Gafiri** – who was only 17 at the time of her arrest – to 18 years in jail and a travel ban of the same length for posting tweets in support of prisoners of conscience; she is currently serving her sentence in Al-Ha’ir Prison in Riyadh. And in November, ALQST learned that the SCC had sentenced medical student **Sara al-Jaar** to 27 years in prison and a travel ban of the same length, also for exercising her right to free speech online.

Given the difficulty of obtaining information on the ground amid the ever worsening climate of fear in Saudi Arabia, it is not possible to know the full extent of such arrests and prison sentences. As such, those described here and throughout the report, along with other violations, likely represent only a fraction of the total.

Saudi Arabia’s infiltration of social media platforms

While the internet was once widely perceived as a space in which people in Saudi Arabia could safely share opinions that they never dared to express in the real world, over the years it has become clear that the Saudi authorities will not tolerate free speech online, and many activists have been prosecuted under the draconian Anti-Cybercrime and Counter-Terrorism Laws for posting tweets critical of the Saudi authorities. As a result, more and more Saudis either self-censor or post anonymously using aliases, but the evidence suggests that even then they may not be safe.



Mohammed al-Rabiah

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. Al-Sadhan is currently serving a 20-year jail term, accused of running a satirical Twitter account. His sister, Areej al-Sadhan, has filed a US civil lawsuit against X, accusing it of becoming “a tool of transnational repression”. Since being taken over by business investor Elon Musk, the platform has become an increasingly unsafe space for journalists, human rights defenders, and dissidents. According to X’s own published data, the company has complied with the majority of governments’ requests for censorship or surveillance.

Sentences increased on appeal or following retrial

As in the case of Salma al-Shehab, detailed above, we have noted a trend in recent years whereby the Saudi courts increase the sentences of prisoners of conscience, often drastically, either on appeal or following retrial when the appeals process has already been exhausted. These retrials may include new charges or the same ones as before, in violation of Saudi law. The authorities sometimes do this with prisoners who are nearing the end of their prison terms, instead of releasing them. For example, human rights activist **Mohammed al-Rabiah**’s original sentence expired in September 2022, but instead of being released he was retried and handed a new 17-year prison term. The reasons for such rulings are often not given.

Ongoing trials and pre-trial detention

Others targeted for calling for their basic rights continue to face trial. Fitness instructor **Manahel al-Otaibi** was due to appear before the SCC on 26 July 2023 for the first session of her trial, but it was postponed without a new date being set. Along with her sister **Fouz al-Otaibi**, who fled Saudi Arabia after being summoned in 2022, she [faces trial](#) on a number of charges related to their peaceful promotion of women's rights, wearing "indecent" clothes, and tweeting under feminist hashtags (see "Women's Rights", [page 47](#)).



Saudi fitness instructor Manahel al-Otaibi latest targeted in crackdown on dissent in kingdom (AP)

Several prisoners of conscience who have been referred to court continue to have their trials endlessly prolonged. They include Islamic scholars **Salman al-Odah** and **Hassan Farhan al-Maliki**, both detained in September 2017, whose trials have continued to drag on for unknown reasons. In both cases the Public Prosecutor is calling for the death penalty, based on a range of vaguely formulated charges.

Judicial proceedings in Saudi Arabia

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

Meanwhile, others arbitrarily arrested are still being held in pre-trial detention for lengthy periods. Examples include many of the young activists and bloggers arrested in May and June 2021 who had been peacefully expressing their opinions online, including **Abdulrahman al-Sheikhi**, **Asma al-Subaei**, **Rina Abdulaziz**, **Yasmine al-Ghufaili**, **Najwa al-Humaid**, and **Lina al-Sharif**.

Prisoners and Detainees at Risk



ALQST documented further examples in 2023 of the Saudi authorities' dangerous and vindictive handling of certain prisoners whose lives they recklessly, if not deliberately, place at risk. For all of those trapped inside Saudi Arabia's harsh prison system conditions are notoriously poor, but prisoners of conscience often also face cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment. In 2023, we again saw the Saudi authorities place the lives of targeted prisoners at risk through reckless negligence, wilful mistreatment, enforced disappearance and deliberate medical neglect.

Attacks on prisoners

In September 2023 we learned that detained fitness trainer **Manahel al-Otaibi** had been wilfully exposed to physical and psychological abuse including beatings, bites and death threats from another inmate in Riyadh's Malaz Prison, where she has been detained since November 2022. Since 5 November 2023, she has also been denied any family contact. While these attacks were not directly inflicted by officials, the prison authorities have made no effort to protect al-Otaibi. Their actions in fact go well beyond mere negligence because, when she notified prison officials, they prevented her from making a complaint and instead placed her in solitary confinement. On her release from solitary confinement, around 27 September 2023, she was placed in a cell shared with drug addicts, making her vulnerable to further violence.

Imprisoned women's rights activist Salma al-Shehab has also been exposed to danger by being placed alongside inmates transferred from a psychiatric hospital who experience violent episodes because of inadequate medical care. She has appealed to the official Saudi Human Rights Commission (SHRC) for these inmates to be held separately and receive adequate treatment, but so far to no avail. Moreover, the Commission has never commented on or investigated al-Shehab's case, nor has it included it in any of its reports.



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

The prison authorities' cynical failure to protect Manahel al-Otaibi and Salma al-Shehab from other, potentially violent, prisoners is part of an established trend. 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 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.

By knowingly placing prisoners of conscience in cells and on wings where they may be at risk from other prisoners and failing to respond to repeated complaints, as well as failing to effectively investigate assaults, the authorities are displaying a callous and persistent disregard for the lives of prisoners of conscience.

The lives of prisoners in Saudi jails are also unnecessarily endangered through the deliberate denial of medical treatment, which has led to a number of deaths in detention in recent years, such as that of iconic human rights defender **Abdullah al-Hamid** in April 2020.



Waleed Abu al-Khair

Hunger strikes in protest over ill-treatment and harassment

Prisoners of conscience have sometimes suffered so much ill-treatment and harassment in jail that, despite intimidation, they have been driven to stage individual or collective hunger strikes to demand their rights and seek improvements in conditions. 2023 saw further examples of such courageous protests. In February, detained human rights defender **Waleed Abu al-Khair** went on hunger strike in response to beatings he had suffered at the hands of other prisoners, in what may have been an orchestrated attack on him. Abu al-Khair, who is serving a 15-year prison sentence for his activism, has routinely faced various forms of ill-treatment in prison, including being held in solitary confinement, and has previously undertaken several hunger strikes. In October he was transferred to the maximum security wing (number 42) in Al-Ha'ir Prison for refusing to undergo a "rehabilitation programme".

On 23 March, women's rights activist **Salma al-Shehab** and seven other detained Saudi women undertook a hunger strike in protest against their unjust detention and trial, and to demand their immediate and unconditional release. Al-Shehab ended her hunger strike in mid-April in order to be able to take medication for her deteriorating mental and physical health.



Salma al-Shehab: Saudi woman jailed over tweets launches hunger strikes

(Middle East Eye)



Mohammed al-Qahtani

And in May, **Shadli al-Huwaiti**, brother of Abdul Rahim al-Huwaiti who was killed by security forces in 2020, went on hunger strike in protest against his alleged torture and ill-treatment in jail, including solitary confinement. Shadli and several family members have been detained since February 2020 for opposing eviction from their homes to make way for the Neom megacity project. During a previous hunger strike, in May 2022, prison officials inserted a tube into al-Huwaiti's stomach to force-feed him, a form of torture (for more on violations against members of the Huwaitat tribe, see [page 41](#)).

Enforced disappearances

The practice of enforced disappearance is systematic and widespread in Saudi Arabia, and continued to be extensively applied by the Saudi authorities in 2023 to prisoners of conscience, including some due for release. **Mohammed al-Qahtani** completed his 10-year prison sentence, on charges relating to his peaceful human rights work, on 22 November 2022, yet has remained forcibly disappeared since 24 October 2022 up to the time of publishing this report. The Saudi authorities have been denying him any contact with his family and the outside world, and have provided misleading information about his whereabouts. On 30 October 2022, his wife was [told](#) by a prison guard that he had been transferred to a different, unspecified, prison. Yet on 30 January 2023, in response to a UN communication, the Saudi authorities claimed that he was still being held in Al-Ha'ir. More recently, in August 2023, Al-Ha'ir Prison officials affirmed to al-Qahtani's wife, in a recorded phone call, that his name could not be found in their system.

Similarly, detained activist and prisoner of conscience **Essa al-Nukheifi** has been forcibly disappeared since 15 October 2022, when he announced a hunger strike in protest over not being released from jail when his six-year sentence expired in September 2022. His family has not been allowed any contact with him or received news of his whereabouts since then.

In their January 2023 response to the UN communication mentioned above, the Saudi authorities claimed that al-Nukheifi and al-Qahtani remained behind bars, despite having served their sentences, because they were under investigation for “committing and inciting others to commit a number of criminal offences within the prison”. Al-Qahtani was due to appear before the Specialised Criminal Court (SCC) for retrial on 1 May 2023, but the trial was postponed due to his absence. The two men’s ongoing enforced disappearance further jeopardises their right to a fair trial, including access to legal counsel. Given that the Saudi authorities have retried several prisoners and increased their sentences, there are concerns that al-Nukheifi and al-Qahtani may similarly face further harsh punishment. While disappeared they are also at heightened risk of other abuses, or even torture.

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), and systematically practises enforced disappearance – sometimes lasting months or even 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 two years.

Journalist **Turki al-Jasser** was likewise arrested in March 2018, following a raid on his home. For almost two years he was not allowed visits or phone calls, and the Saudi authorities refused to answer any inquiries about him. Apart from a single phone call to his family in February 2020, he has again been denied all further contact.

While disappeared, individuals are at heightened risk of other human rights violations, such as torture, because they are held 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 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.

Conditional Releases and Travel Bans

2023 saw several more prisoners of conscience released after completion of their prison sentences, but once again only on strict conditions that routinely included arbitrary bans on travel, work and social media activity. The Saudi authorities also continued to impose arbitrary travel bans on detainees' family members, preventing them too from leaving the country, in a form of collective punishment.

Prisoners released

On 7 January, human rights defender and Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association (ACPRA) member **Abdulkarim al-Khodr**, detained in 2013 and sentenced to 10 years in prison for his peaceful human rights work, was released following the expiry of his sentence. He remains under a 10-year travel ban.

On 10 January, **Abdulrahman al-Hamid**, another human rights defender and ACPRA member, detained in 2014 and sentenced to nine years in prison for his peaceful activism, was released following the expiry of his sentence. He remains under a nine-year travel ban.

The Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association (ACPRA)

The Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association (ACPRA) 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. Five remain imprisoned today: Dr **Mohammed al-Qahtani** (who completed his sentence in November 2022, yet remains in detention incommunicado); **Mohammed al-Bajadi**; **Abdulaziz al-Shubaily**; **Fawzan al-Harbi**; and **Essa al-Hamid**.



On 20 March, **Saad Ibrahim al-Madi**, a 72-year-old dual Saudi-US national, was released from prison and the charges against him were dropped. Arrested in 2021, he was sentenced in October 2022 to 19 years in prison over peaceful tweets. He remains under an arbitrary and unofficial travel ban.

In June, Saudi activist, nurse and mother of three **Fatima Al Nassif** was released after spending almost six years in prison. Al Nassif was forcibly arrested in September 2017 while in the car with her two daughters. Her son passed away while she was in prison.

Several non-Saudi nationals were released in 2023 and deported back to their countries of origin. In April, Yemeni journalist **Marwan al-Muraisy** was released following the expiry of his sentence; he is now in Yemen. Al-Muraisy was arrested in June 2018 and subjected to months of enforced disappearance, and later sentenced to five years in prison. Al-Muraisy had lived and worked in Saudi Arabia since 2003, working for several Saudi media outlets.

Also in April 2023, Tunisian nurse **Mahdia Marzougui** was released from prison and the charges against her were dropped. She arrived back in Tunisia on 31 August. Arrested in July 2020, Marzougui was sentenced to 15 years in prison on charges relating to her social media activity, including retweeting and sharing posts on Twitter and Facebook. That same month, Palestinian national **Hani al-Khudari**, whose sentence expired in February 2022, was deported to Jordan following his release. Al-Khudari was arrested in April 2019, and sentenced to three years in prison in the context of a mass trial of dozens of Jordanians and Palestinians marred by serious due process violations. Like his father Mohammed al-Khudari, who was released in 2022, he faced persistent medical neglect in prison.



Marwan al-Muraisy

Ongoing travel bans

Many of the prisoners of conscience who have been released in recent years continue to face heavy restrictions, notably travel bans that prevent them from leaving the country. Such bans are usually imposed in advance as part of their judicial sentence, but sometimes also arbitrarily when the official travel ban comes to an end. Women's rights activist **Maryam al-Otaibi**, for example, remains in the country under an unofficial travel ban imposed as a result of her activism. She has tried to have the ban lifted by contacting several official bodies including the Ministry of Interior, the Presidency of State Security and the Saudi Human Rights Commission, but so far without success.

Legality of travel bans

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that every person has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each state, and the right to leave any country, including their own, and to return to it (Article 13). 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" (Article 21).

The kingdom's own legislation upholds this right: Article 6, para. 2 of the Travel Document Law states that no 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 security-related reasons, and for a specific period of time. Such measures are normally taken in cases relating to financial crimes, child custody, or ongoing criminal investigations. The Law adds that individuals prohibited from travelling are to be notified within one week of the ruling or decision being issued.



From left to right: Khalid Aljabri, Abdullah Alaoudh, Fouz al-Otaibi, Nasser al-Qarni, Lina Alhathloul

Travel bans have a serious impact on the lives of both the individuals directly affected and their friends and families. In recent years the Saudi authorities have made repeated and increasing use of arbitrary travel bans on family members of activists as a form of reprisal and collective punishment, and to deter individuals from engaging in human rights work for the sake of not only their own safety but also that of their relatives. Such restrictions may be imposed without notification of any legal justification, judicial ruling or official decision, and the activists' family members often learn of them only when attempting to leave the kingdom, whether by air or by crossing a land border.

The Saudi authorities continued this practice in 2023, and in August 2023 a group of Saudi nationals living abroad, including ALQST's Head of Monitoring and Advocacy, **Lina Alhathloul**, as well as **Abdullah Alaoudh, Khalid Aljabri, Nasser al-Qarni** and **Fouz al-Otaibi**, [wrote](#) to the Saudi Human Rights Commission (SHRC) seeking the lifting of travel bans applying to their relatives in Saudi Arabia, none of whom has been accused of any wrongdoing. Their previous efforts to engage with the SHRC had not received any response. In their letter, the activists pointed out that their relatives have no means of recourse: since these bans are unofficial and do not have any legal basis, there is no way to formally appeal them. The inability to pursue their personal goals and visit family members abroad has had a profound impact on the mental health and emotional well-being of both the activists in the diaspora and their families in Saudi Arabia.

“The Saudi Human Rights Commission: a Whitewashing Tool of the Kingdom”

Since its establishment in 2005, the Saudi Human Rights Commission (SHRC) has, in principle, been responsible for promoting and protecting human rights in the country. The Commission is mandated to undertake a number of human rights-related tasks, including addressing human rights complaints, engaging in legislative work, and monitoring detention facilities. In theory, it stands as an independent entity, capable of holding the government accountable and advancing human rights on the ground.

On 28 November 2023, MENA Rights Group, ALQST and the European Saudi Organisation for Human Rights released a joint report entitled “The Saudi Human Rights Commission: A Whitewashing Tool for the Kingdom”. The report raises serious concerns about the Commission’s independence and effectiveness, finding substantial and undeniable evidence that it in fact acts as a tool for whitewashing the Kingdom’s poor human rights record and covering up gross abuses.

Use of the Death Penalty

The Saudi state executed at least 172 individuals during 2023, including dozens on terrorism charges that in some cases related to taking part in protests. Meanwhile, further death sentences were upheld for crimes allegedly committed by minors, placing several at imminent risk of execution following grossly unfair trials, and destroying the authorities' claims to have discontinued use of the death penalty for juvenile offenders. In another grim milestone for the kingdom, 2023 also saw the first known death sentence issued solely for peaceful social media activity.

Number of known executions in Saudi Arabia since 2015	
2015	158
2016	154
2017	146
2018	150
2019	185
2020	27
2021	67
2022	196
2023	172

Saudi Arabia has for years been among the countries carrying out the highest number of executions in the world. Yet despite a pledge in 2018 from Saudi Arabia's 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. In 2023, the authorities conducted at least 172 executions, in flagrant disregard for the right to life. Yet in the absence of transparency, and with executions often carried out in secret, the real figures may be even higher. In 2022 for example, 148 executions were published by the official Saudi Press Agency, based on announcements made by the Ministry of Interior. However, in response to a request for information from Amnesty International, Saudi

Arabia's Human Rights Commission revealed that a total of 196 people had in fact been executed during the year, the highest annual figure in recent Saudi history.

Of the 172 individuals recorded as having been executed in 2023, all but six were male, and 135 (78%) were Saudi nationals. Over 90% of those executed were convicted of murder or other violent crimes, including a range of terrorism-related offences. Two men (in unrelated cases), a Jordanian and a Pakistani national, were executed for drug smuggling; this was a marked reduction on the previous year, when 20 convicted drug smugglers of various nationalities were executed in a two-week period in November 2022, despite the announcement in January 2021 of a moratorium on use of the death penalty for such non-violent crimes. In 2023, 51 men and one woman (30% of all those executed) had been sentenced to death on the basis of *ta'zir* (the judge's discretion). The main method of execution has traditionally been beheading, and in recent years has also included shooting.

Terrorism-related offences can include a wide range of non-violent acts, such as taking part in protests. On 29 May, the Saudi authorities executed two young Bahrainis, **Jaafar Sultan** and **Sadiq Thamer**, on terrorism- and protest-related charges. They had been sentenced to death by the Specialised Criminal Court (SCC) in October 2021 on the basis of *ta'zir*, following a grossly unfair trial which relied on coerced confessions. The decision was upheld by the Court of Appeal on 11 January 2022 and the Supreme Court on 7 April 2022, despite United Nations Special Rapporteurs [sending](#) a letter to the Saudi authorities calling on them to immediately overturn the sentences, stating that the imposition of the death sentence would constitute an "arbitrary killing".

Earlier in the year, the authorities had also defied calls from UN representatives when on 12 March they executed Jordanian national **Hussein Abu al-Khair**, who was accused of drug smuggling, following an unfair trial that relied on "confessions" extracted under torture. The UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention had [found](#) his detention to be arbitrary and without legal basis, and called for his release, as did the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). Abu al-Khair's family was not notified of the execution in advance or offered a chance to say goodbye to him.

Families left in the dark

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.



Hussein Abu al-Khair

Minors still at risk of execution

The Saudi authorities are also failing to deliver on what have proved to be false promises in relation to the death penalty for juveniles. At least nine young men are at risk of execution in Saudi Arabia for crimes they allegedly committed as minors, in direct contradiction of official claims to have ended this violation of international human rights law. Their sentences all followed grossly unfair trials.

Between July 2022 and March 2023, the SCC Appeal Court upheld death sentences against **Jalal al-Labad, Abdullah al-Derazi, Hassan al-Faraj, Youssef al-Manasef** and **Ali al-Mabiyouq**, and the Criminal Court in Tabuk that of **Abdullah al-Huwaiti**. All six are now at significant risk of execution. Sometime in mid-2023, the Supreme Court upheld the sentences against Jalal al-Labad and Abdullah al-Derazi, placing them at imminent risk of execution; they could be put to death at any moment if the king ratifies the sentence.

In October 2022, the SCC also handed down death sentences for **Jawad Qureiris** and **Ali Hassan al-Subaiti** that are currently under appeal. Meanwhile, the prosecution is calling for the death penalty against **Mahdi al-Mohsen** too.

Abdullah al-Huwaiti was charged with murder and robbery, based on confessions allegedly extracted under torture. The other eight have been convicted or face charges under the kingdom's draconian Counter-Terrorism Law, for a wide range of offences that took place when they were under the age of 18. These include acts protected by the rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association, such as participating in protests and attending the funerals of people killed by the security forces, as well as "seeking to destabilise the social fabric and national cohesion".



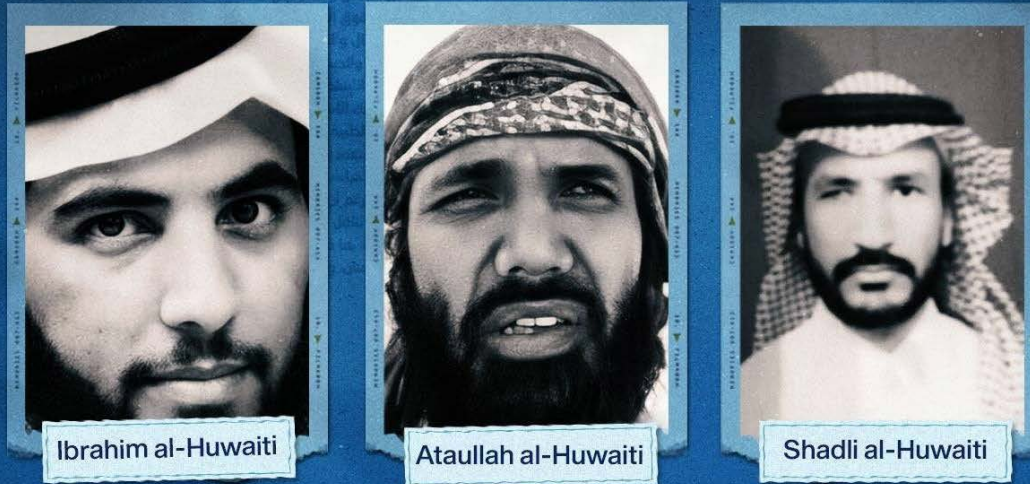
From top left to bottom right: Abdullah al-Derazi, Hassan al-Faraj, Youssef al-Manasef, Ali al-Mabiyouq, Abdullah al-Huwaiti, Jawad Qureiris, Ali Hassan al-Subaiti, Mahdi al-Mohsen, Jalal al-Labad

The courts' rulings have followed grossly unfair trials that failed to meet basic standards of due process, including by denying legal counsel and access to criminal files, and admitting coerced confessions as evidence in court. Following their arrests between 2014 and 2021, several of these young men were subjected to severe physical and psychological torture including beatings, electrocution and death threats. Some were hospitalised as a result and developed health complications, yet the Saudi courts have failed to investigate their complaints.

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, the decree has yet to be published and its status remains 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, the principal official source on the matter, stated that the decree covered the sentencing of juveniles for any crime, including terrorist offences. Six months later, after human rights organisations had publicised the flaws in the supposed 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 promises have been completely undermined by the execution in June 2021 of Mustafa Hashem al-Darwish for teenage protests, and the latest sentences against further juvenile offenders.



Others at risk of execution

Dozens more detainees remain at risk of execution. On 23 January 2023, Saudi Arabia's SCC Appeal Court upheld death sentences against three members of the Huwaitat tribe, **Shadli**, **Ibrahim** and **Atallah al-Huwaiti**, in relation to their peaceful opposition to forced evictions and the displacement of hundreds of local residents to make way for the state-led Neom megacity project. The men were tried under the Counter-Terrorism Law on a number of vague charges in relation to their peaceful actions, including activity on Twitter. Their sentences are subject to appeal in the Supreme Court; if the Supreme Court upholds them the three men will be at risk of imminent execution.

Huwaitat tribe members **Suleiman Mohammad Moussa al-Huwaiti** and **Eid Hmoud al-Mashouri al-Huwaiti** have also been handed death sentences. Both had been subjected to enforced disappearance following their arrest, and were transferred to a military court. At the time of writing this report, ALQST does not have any further information about their sentences.

On 10 July 2023, the SCC sentenced to death **Mohammed al-Ghamdi**, brother of prominent Saudi dissident Saeed al-Ghamdi, solely for his social media activity. The charges brought against him under the Counter-Terrorism Law included "describing the King or the Crown Prince in a way that undermines religion or justice" and "publishing false news with the intention of executing a terrorist crime". The only evidence brought against him cited comments made to his handful of followers on Twitter (now renamed X) and YouTube.



Saudi Arabia reportedly sentences man to death for criticizing government on social media (CBS News)

Forced Evictions and Displacement

During 2023, the Saudi authorities continued their vicious campaign of arrests and prosecutions against members of the Huwaitat tribe for protesting against forcible eviction from their homes in the northwest of the Saudi kingdom to make way for the planned Neom megacity project. Land seizures and forced displacement are longstanding practices of the Saudi authorities. In the course of their unlawful acquisition of land and properties, often on sites earmarked for state development projects such as Neom, they routinely trample on residents' rights, including the right to compensation.

In February 2023, ALQST published *The Dark Side of Neom: Expropriation, expulsion and prosecution of the region's inhabitants*, a detailed report based on first-hand testimonies from victims and witnesses as well as open-source data, which paints a disturbing picture of the serious human rights violations being committed in connection with Neom.

The Dark Side of Neom: Expropriation, expulsion and prosecution of the region's inhabitants

Neom, the \$500 billion megacity starting to be built on Saudi Arabia's Red Sea coast, is the centrepiece of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's "Vision 2030" economic programme. Even before the project was announced, the region's inhabitants – predominantly members of the 20,000-strong Huwaitat tribe – were illegally dispossessed of their properties and forcibly evicted from their homes, often without compensation. In the process, one man, Abdul Rahim al-Huwaiti, was shot dead by the security forces; dozens more Huwaitat members were arbitrarily arrested for peacefully resisting the tribe's forcible displacement and speaking out against the injustices inflicted on them. In 2022, several were sentenced under counter-terrorism legislation to exceptionally harsh prison terms of between 15 and 50 years, and at least five were even sentenced to death.

The Saudi authorities continued to arrest and prosecute members of the Huwaitat tribe throughout 2023. In late February, the Specialised Criminal Court (SCC) sentenced **Muhammad Mahmoud Suleiman al-Huwaiti** to 30 years in prison, becoming the latest member of the tribe to be handed a lengthy prison sentence for speaking out against illegal evictions associated with the Neom project (see table below). At least five have been sentenced to death, with three of the sentences upheld by the Appeal Court in January 2023 and currently awaiting a final ruling from the Supreme Court (see "Use of the Death Penalty", [page 41](#)).



In May, the Saudi authorities re-arrested **Ibrahim Sabah al-Amiri al-Huwaiti**, a man in his 70s, in the Red Sea coastal city of Duba. He had been forcibly evicted from his village of Sharma, further north, as part of the land clearances for Neom. Ibrahim was first arrested in 2021 and spent three months in prison under investigation before being released without charge. Arrested again in May 2023, he is among at least 40 members of the tribe still in detention. In a similar fashion to the silencing of human rights defenders and other peaceful dissidents, the Saudi authorities have branded these members of the Huwaitat tribe “terrorists” posing a threat to national security, and are prosecuting them, implausibly, under the Counter-Terrorism Law. Some of the spurious charges brought against them are “expressing sympathy and praise for a terrorist” (clearly referring to Abdul Rahim al-Huwaiti, the vocal opponent of the evictions who was shot dead in his home in April 2020 by Saudi Special Forces), and “creating a Twitter account to tear apart national cohesion”.

Members of the Huwaitat tribe whose sentence ALQST has been able to verify:

Name	Sentence
Ahmed Atallah Salameh al-Huwaiti	15 years
Thamer Tayseer Ibrahim al-Huwaiti	20 years
Ahmed Abdel Nasser Ahmed al-Huwaiti	21 years
Mahmoud Salem Salama al-Huwaiti	22 years
Maha Suleiman al-Qarani al-Huwaiti	23 years
Abdel Nasser Ahmed Hammoud al-Huwaiti	27 years

Name	Sentence
Muhammad Saqr Mahmoud al-Huwaiti	30 years
Abdullah Ibrahim Maqbool al-Huwaiti	30 years
Abdullah Saleh Hayes al-Huwaiti	30 years
Muhammad Mahmoud Suleiman al-Huwaiti	30 years
Mahmoud Ahmed Mahmoud al-Huwaiti	35 years
Attia Suleiman Hamad al-Huwaiti	35 years
Mustafa Abdul Rahim Mahmoud al-Huwaiti	38 years
Rashid Ibrahim Maqbool al-Huwaiti	45 years
Abdullah Dakhil Allah Saleh al-Huwaiti	50 years
Abdulilah Rashid Ibrahim al-Huwaiti	50 years
Shadli Ahmed Mahmoud al-Huwaiti	Execution (upheld by Appeal Court)
Ataullah Musa Muhammad al-Huwaiti	Execution (upheld by Appeal Court)
Ibrahim Saleh Ahmed Abu Khalil al-Huwaiti	Execution (upheld by Appeal Court)
Suleiman Mohammad Moussa al-Huwaiti	Execution
Eid Hmoud al-Mashouri al-Huwaiti	Execution

In another worrying development, from mid-June Saudi security forces broke into several houses of relatives of Abdul Rahim al-Huwaiti and cut off their access to water and electricity. These included the homes of Abdul Rahim's mother and his brother **Shadli al-Huwaiti** (sentenced to death), **Ibrahim Saleh al-Huwaiti** (sentenced to death) and **Abdullah Dakhil Allah al-Huwaiti** (sentenced to 50 years). No further arrests were made.

In early 2023, ALQST and MENA Rights Group submitted several cases of members of the Huwaitat tribe to UN Special Procedures, including the UN Working Group on Enforced and Involuntary Disappearances. The joint submission highlighted the cases of three men sentenced to death (Shadli Ahmed Mahmoud, Ibrahim Saleh Ahmed, and Ataullah Musa Muhammad al-Huwaiti) and three sentenced to prison terms of between 27 and 50 years (Abdel Nasser Ahmad Mahmoud, Abdullah Dakhil Allah and Mahmoud Ahmed Mahmoud al-Huwaiti).



Pictured at an equestrian race in al-Khuraiba, May 2018: Abdullah Dakhil Allah Saleh al-Huwaiti (far left); Abdullah Rashid Ibrahim al-Huwaiti (third from left, on the horse); Rashid Ibrahim Maqbool al-Huwaiti (fourth from left, holding award); Abdullah Ibrahim Maqbool al-Huwaiti (sixth from left, bearded, holding an award aloft).

Following the submission, a group of seven human rights UN experts [sent](#) an Urgent Action to Saudi Arabia’s authorities addressing the violations, expressing “profound concern” over the imminent risk of execution of the first three and the long sentences of the others, and drew attention to reports of their having been subjected to torture and ill-treatment in custody. Communications were also sent to the Chair of Neom’s Board of Directors and Saudi Arabia’s Public Investment Fund.



Saudi Arabia’s Neom: A prestigious project with a dark side (DW)

ALQST survey documents the devastating impact of evictions

The violations perpetrated against the Huwaitat tribe are not isolated incidents. Neom is only the most ambitious and heavily publicised of the development plans included in Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman’s “Vision 2030” economic transformation programme. Another is the \$20 billion Jeddah Central development project, which plans to remodel several neighbourhoods in the historic port city of Jeddah and construct, among other things, a museum, an opera house and a sports stadium as well as recreational and tourist areas. Large-scale evictions and demolitions in relation to this project began in October 2021 and continued until May 2022, affecting more than half a million people.

The authorities claimed that the purpose of the widescale demolition of homes and businesses was to allow the redevelopment of run-down urban areas plagued by crime and lawlessness, and to improve the quality of life for citizens. However, a [survey](#) carried out by ALQST in April 2022 painted a very different picture, showing their devastating impact. Many of those evicted had not received any notification in advance or been given clear information on how to submit claims for compensation.

Women's Rights



The legal framework affecting the lives of women in Saudi Arabia in 2023 continued to be shaped by the Personal Status (or Family) Law, which, despite being touted by the authorities as a major reform, in fact entrenches many pernicious features of the traditional male guardianship system. The Saudi nationality law also continues to discriminate against women despite a minor technical amendment in early 2023. Meanwhile, women human rights defenders, women's rights activists, and even private individuals simply expressing support for women's rights continued to be targeted by the authorities for arrest and prosecution.

Gender discrimination codified in law

The Personal Status (or Family) Law was passed on 8 March 2022 and came into force on 18 June that year. 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 major step forward, but in fact proved to affirm and codify many features of the male guardianship system. It also contains legal loopholes that continue to allow discretionary interpretation, thus diminishing the impact of the positive changes it introduced. 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.

Key features of the Personal Status Law

Marriage	Requires women to obtain a male guardian's permission to get married
Child marriage	Sets the legal age of marriage as 18, but allows courts to authorise the marriage of a child under 18 in certain cases
Divorce	While men can initiate divorce without conditions, women face many conditions
Child custody	While the mother is automatically granted custody of any children in the event of separation, this is undermined by the fact that the father remains a child's legal guardian by default
Inheritance	Grants men a larger share of assets than women
Domestic violence	The codification of women's obedience to their husbands places them at further risk of domestic violence

The recent case of US citizen **Carly Morris** highlights the limitations of the Personal Status Law with regard to women's rights. Morris and her daughter had been trapped in Saudi Arabia since 2019, having arrived there for the first time in August 2019 for what was intended to be a short visit to introduce the girl to her father's family. However, the father, exercising his rights under the kingdom's discriminatory male guardianship laws, then refused to allow the girl to go home to the United States with her mother. Although the Personal Status Law stipulates that, in the event of a couple's separation, the mother is automatically granted custody of any children, this is undermined by the fact that the father remains a child's legal guardian by default and is able to prevent her from relocating outside Saudi Arabia with their children.

Morris's situation became even more desperate when on 15 September 2022 she was summoned by local police in Qassim for questioning by the public prosecutor for "disrupting public order", a charge commonly brought in Saudi Arabia against people who express any criticism of the authorities. On 18 September she learned that the Saudi authorities had placed her under a travel ban making her, too, unable to leave the country, even without her daughter. On 7 November Morris was called in by the police in Buraydah, supposedly to clarify details relating to her daughter's identity papers, but instead she was arrested and held for two days. Her travel ban was finally lifted on 22 June 2023 and she was given an exit permit in August. Even after leaving the country, she remained charged with "renouncing Islam", "slander" and "insulting the country and Islam", with the next hearing in her trial due to take place in her absence on 10 September at Riyadh Criminal Court. On 6 November, an arrest warrant was issued for her, but on 10 December, her case was finally dismissed.

Further discrimination under nationality law

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. In early 2023, the authorities announced a minor technical amendment to Article 8 of the law, transferring the authority to grant citizenship to the children of Saudi mothers and non-Saudi fathers from the Minister of Interior to the Prime Minister. However, the almost impossible conditions for this to happen have not changed.

Ongoing targeting of women's rights supporters

While the kingdom's leaders claim to be champions of women's empowerment, their continuing targeting and punishment of women's rights activists, human rights defenders and even private individuals expressing support for women's rights severely undermines their narrative of reform. In recent months the Saudi courts have convicted and passed long jail sentences on several women over peaceful rights activity on social media, including 18-year-old secondary school student **Manal al-Gafiri** (18 years imprisonment), **Salma al-Shehab** (27 years), **Fatima al-Shawarbi** (30 years), **Sukaynah al-Aithan** (40 years), and **Nourah al-Qahtani** (45 years). This has happened in the context of an intensified crackdown on social media activity in general (see "Unfair Trials and Harsh Sentences", [page 23](#)).





From left to right: Manahel, Fouz and Maryam al-Otaibi

The case of two sisters, **Manahel** and **Fouz al-Otaibi**, stands in particularly stark contrast to the authorities' talk of reform and empowerment for women. They both face charges under the kingdom's draconian Anti-Cybercrime Law that include "opposing the laws relating to women, such as the male guardianship system and the hijab law", "participating in several hashtags opposing these laws, notably *#isqaat al-wilaaya* ('abolish male guardianship')", "having several photos and video clips in indecent clothes on [their] [social media] accounts", and "going to the shops without wearing an *abaya*, photographing this, and publishing it on Snapchat".

Their 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 has not been 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 now states that the kingdom welcomes LGBT guests, no steps have been taken to recognise LGBT people as having basic rights such as freedom from discrimination, nor is there any indication that the authorities are willing to do so. 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.

Manahel is currently being detained in Malaz Prison in Riyadh, and faces trial before the Specialised Criminal Court (SCC). Fouz fled Saudi Arabia after being summonsed in 2022, and remains at risk of imprisonment should she return home. A third sister, women's rights activist **Maryam al-Otaibi**, remains in the country under an unofficial travel ban as a result of her activism. (see "Conditional Releases and Travel Bans", [page 33](#)). As their case indicate, women in Saudi Arabia continue to live

in fear and uncertainty regarding the most basic of personal freedoms, including the choice of what to wear. In the absence of any clear guidelines or legal transparency, women are left not knowing where the boundaries lie and what possible consequences their personal choices might have.

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 travel bans that prevent them from leaving the country.



Migrant Workers' Rights



Despite some limited reforms in recent years, Saudi Arabia's notorious *kafala* (sponsorship) system remained substantially intact in 2023, with migrant workers and domestic workers in particular continuing to suffer routine abuse. A new law for domestic workers, announced on 2 October 2023 and due to come into effect on 21 September 2024, will offer several protections, if implemented. Meanwhile, the authorities ramped up their crackdown on Ethiopian migrants, with mass killings at the Saudi-Yemen border.

Migrant workers in Saudi Arabia

Migrant workers make up roughly one-third of the population of Saudi Arabia, approximately 10 million out of an estimated 36 million people, according to the General Authority for Statistics. Of these, 75% come from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Egypt and the Philippines. They face multiple problems due to a number of complex and thorny regulations in the Labour Law and private sector regulations.

Kafala (sponsorship) system

Saudi Arabia's notorious *kafala* (sponsorship) 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 in relation to their visa and residence status and ability to travel. In March 2021, the Saudi authorities introduced limited reforms to the *kafala* system, including allowing workers to change jobs under certain circumstances and apply for an exit permit to leave the country without obtaining their employer's (or sponsor's) consent. Yet the guidelines behind the initiative fail to address several important issues or protect workers from many other abuses, and the system as a whole remains largely intact. One major flaw, for example, is that various categories of worker are not covered by the new reforms at all, including millions of domestic workers.

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.

On 2 October 2023, Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development issued a new law for domestic workers, Ministerial Decision No. 40676 of 2 October 2023 (03/17/1445 AH), superseding the previous law, [Ministerial Decision No. 310 of 2013](#). The new law, which will come into effect on 21 September 2024, introduces several important provisions, including a ban on passport confiscation, the establishment of maximum working hours (10 hours per day), minimum age restrictions (21) and allowing domestic workers to terminate their contracts under certain circumstances. However, it excludes 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 has been poor.

Mass killing of Ethiopian migrants

In recent years, international NGOs including [Amnesty International](#) and [Human Rights Watch](#) have documented the dire situation of hundreds of thousands of mostly Ethiopian migrants being arbitrarily detained in inhuman and cruel conditions in Saudi detention centres and forcibly returned to Ethiopia, where many subsequently [face](#) further detention and abuse. This situation is exacerbated by the Saudi *kafala* system, which makes it impossible for undocumented migrants to obtain valid residency documents in the country. In August 2023, Human Rights Watch published a report, ["They Fired On Us Like Rain"](#), detailing the mass killing by Saudi border guards of hundreds of Ethiopian migrants and asylum seekers, including women and children, as they tried to cross the Saudi-Yemen border between March 2022 and June 2023.

Recommendations



Recommendations for the international community:

- Establish an immediate moratorium on all arms sales and exports of surveillance technology to Saudi Arabia;
- Consider the general human rights situation when engaging in business with the Saudi authorities, assess the adverse human rights impact this might have, and tie this engagement to human rights conditions;
- Introduce and endorse a UN resolution to establish a monitoring mechanism over the human rights situation in Saudi Arabia; and
- Urge the authorities in Saudi Arabia to implement the recommendations below.

Recommendations for the Saudi authorities:

- Ensure that the rights to freedom of expression, assembly and association are fully respected in law and practice and immediately and unconditionally release all prisoners of conscience who are being detained for exercising their fundamental freedoms, including those detained beyond completion of their prison sentences.
- Ratify the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights;
- Reform the country's legal system by promulgating a constitution and a criminal code, and by revising the Law on Combating Crimes of Terrorism and its Financing, the Anti-Cybercrime Law, the Law on Printing and Publication and the Law on Associations and Foundations to bring them into full conformity with international standards;
- 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;

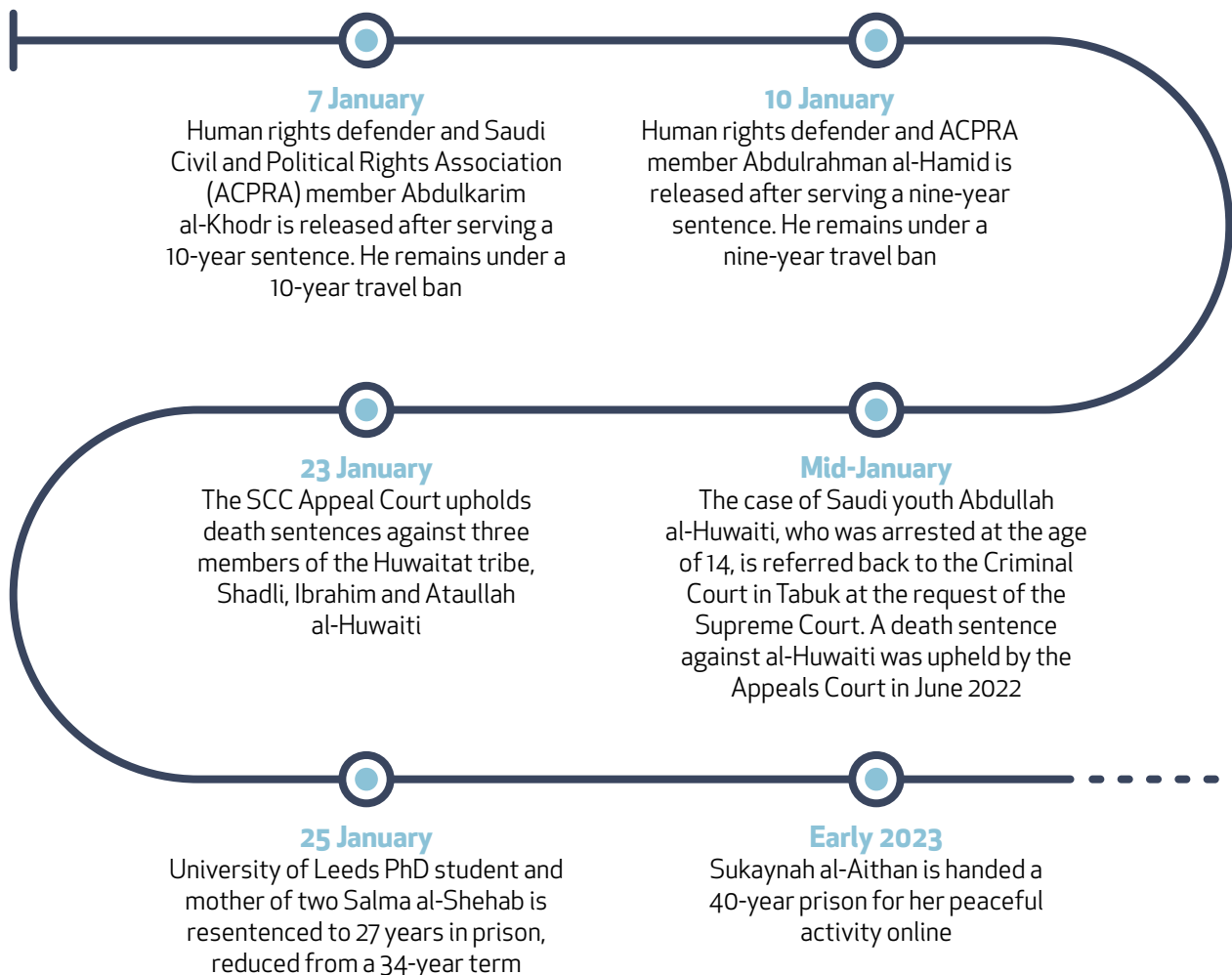
- Put an end to the practice of arbitrary detention, and effectively afford individuals deprived of their liberty all fundamental legal safeguards and fair trial rights;
- Abolish the Specialised Criminal Court (SCC) and refrain from subjecting peaceful dissidents to reprisals under the pretext of countering 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;
- Immediately lift all remaining restrictions, especially travel bans, imposed on those who have been conditionally released from prison for exercising their rights to freedom of expression, assembly and association;
- Immediately abolish the male guardianship system, repealing laws and ending practices that discriminate against women;
- Amend the Personal Status (Family) Law (PSL) so that it fully safeguards the rights of women and children;
- 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, commuted on appeal or in cases in which amnesty or pardon has been granted;
- Put an end to the practice of enforced disappearance and ratify the UN Convention on the Protection of all Persons from Enforced Disappearance;
- Improve the management and oversight of prison facilities and ensure that the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners are upheld in all places of detention;
- Abolish the *kafala* system and ratify the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families as well as ILO Convention No. 189 on Domestic Workers;

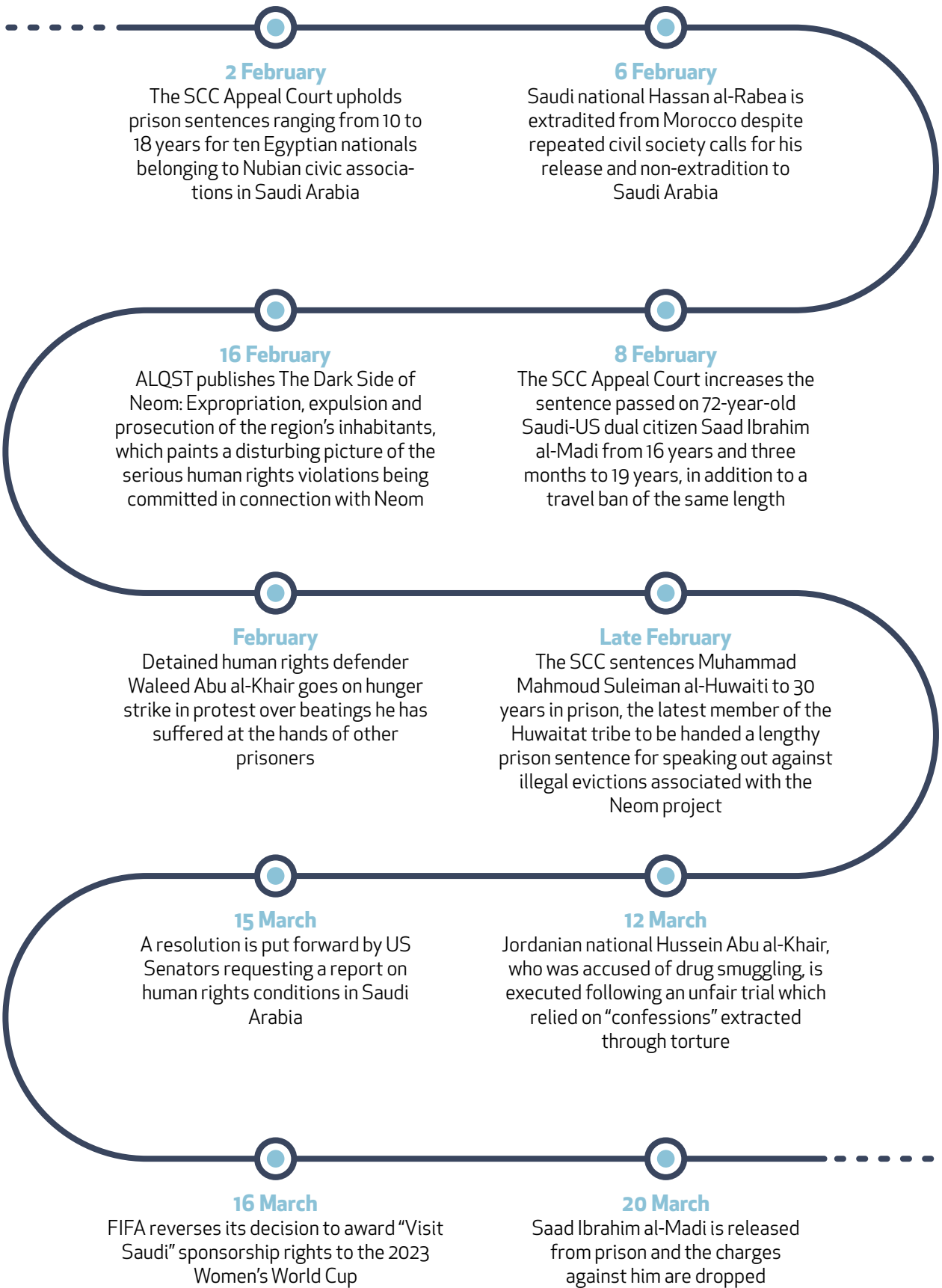


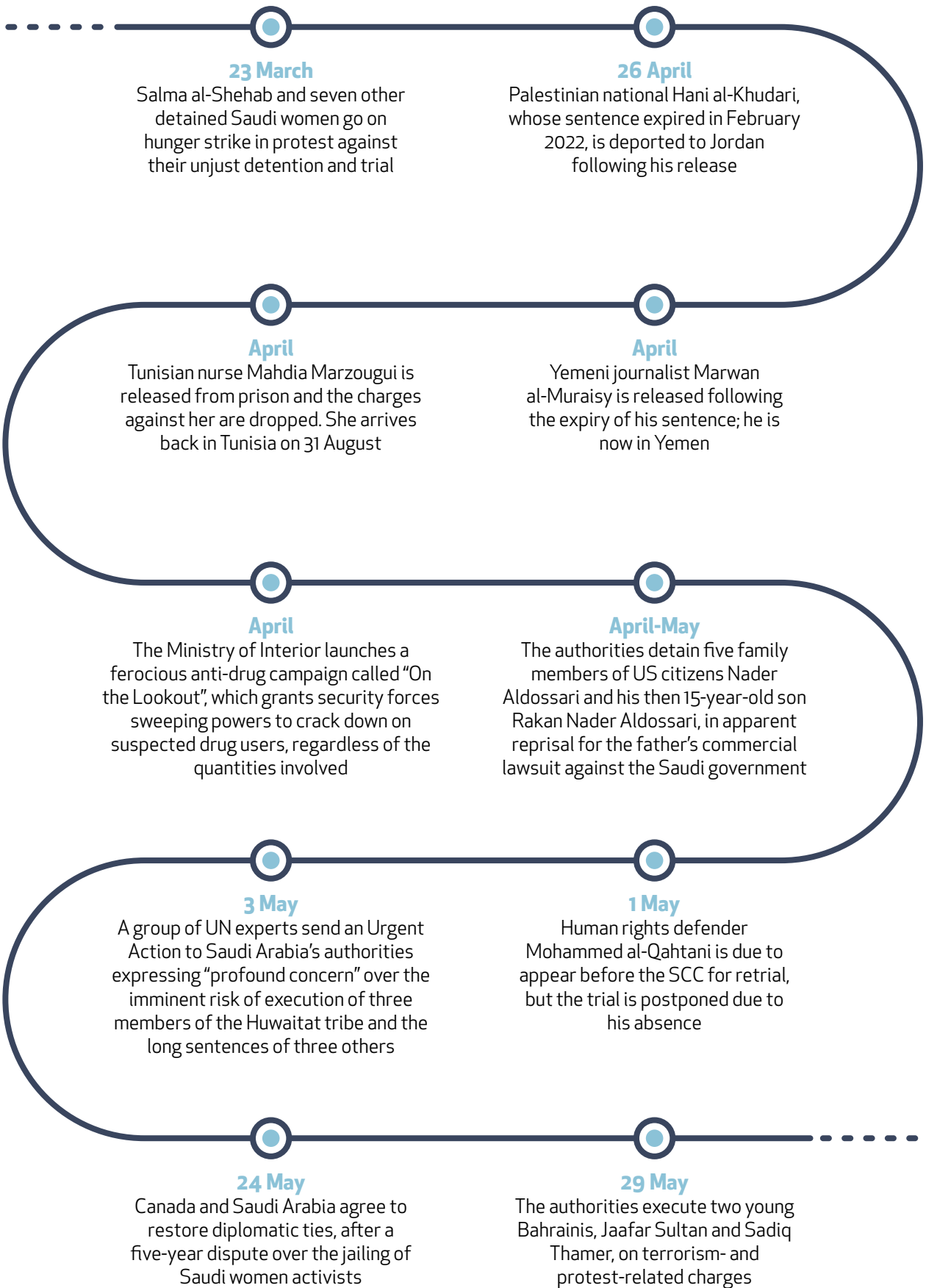
- Put an end to the practice of unlawful demolitions and forced displacement, and instead conduct consultations with residents, and provide adequate prior notice and sufficient compensation for losses; and
- Facilitate the naturalisation of stateless individuals and ratify the 1954 Convention Relating 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.

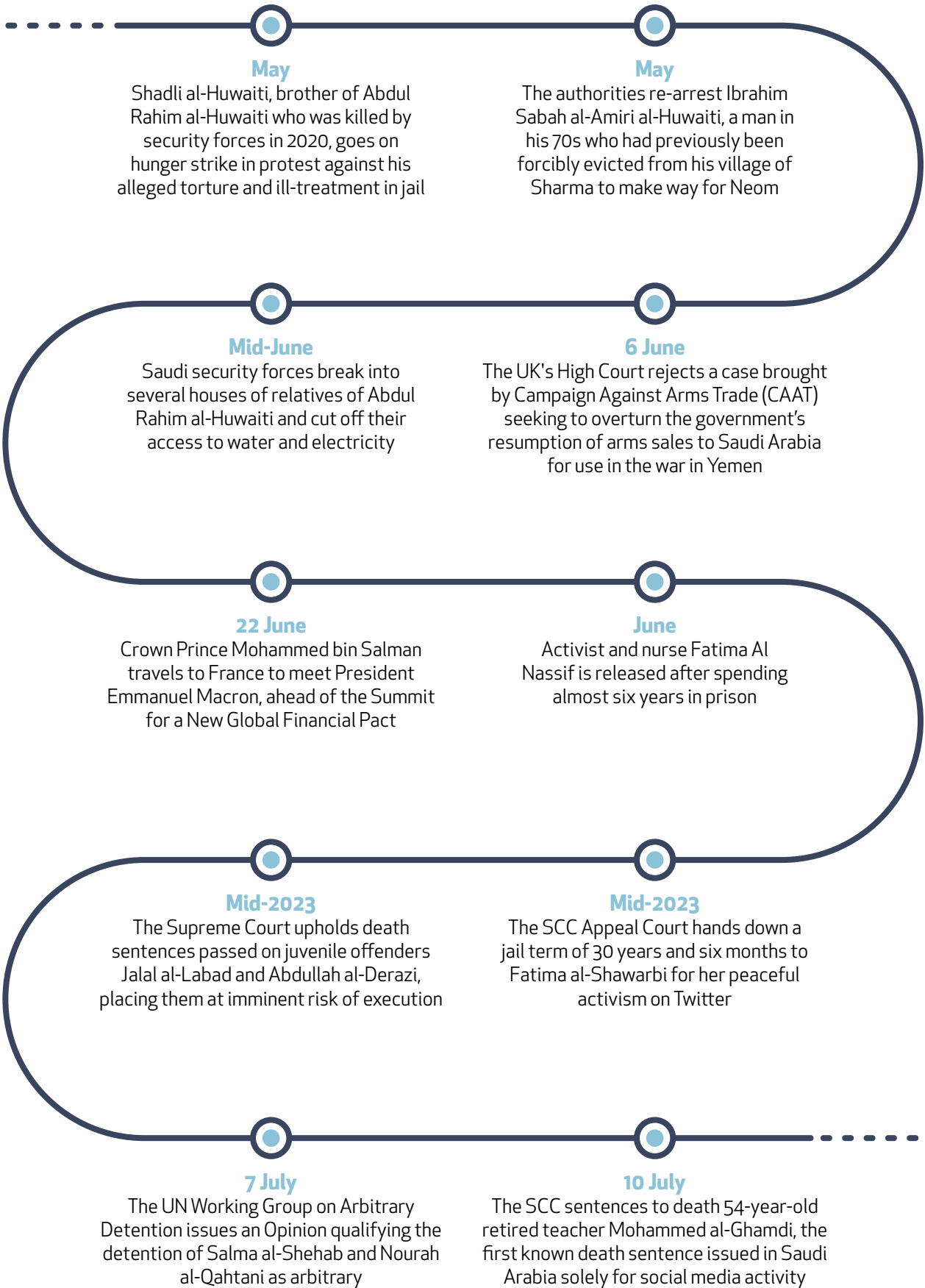


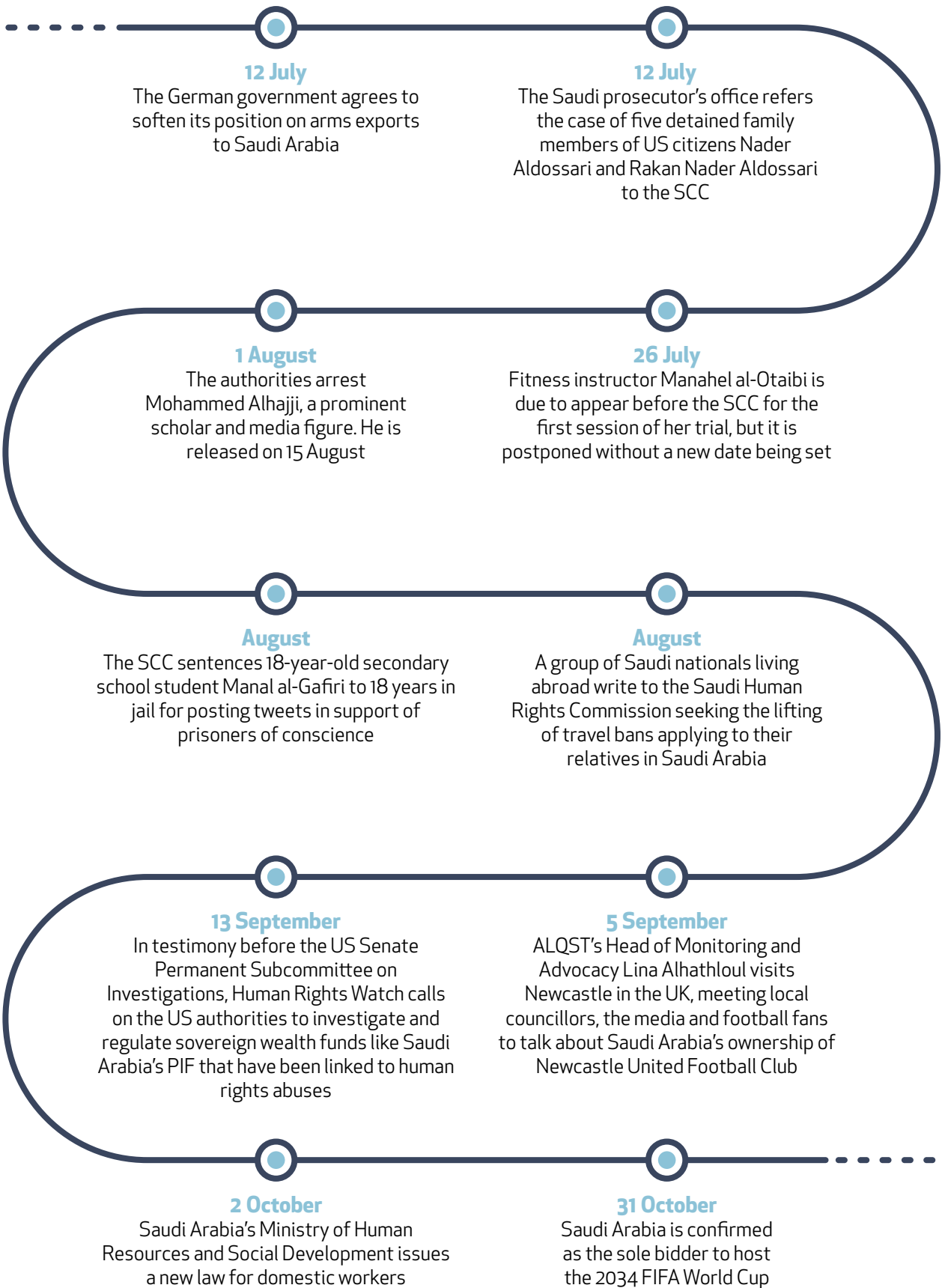
Timeline of Human Rights-Related Events in Saudi Arabia in 2023

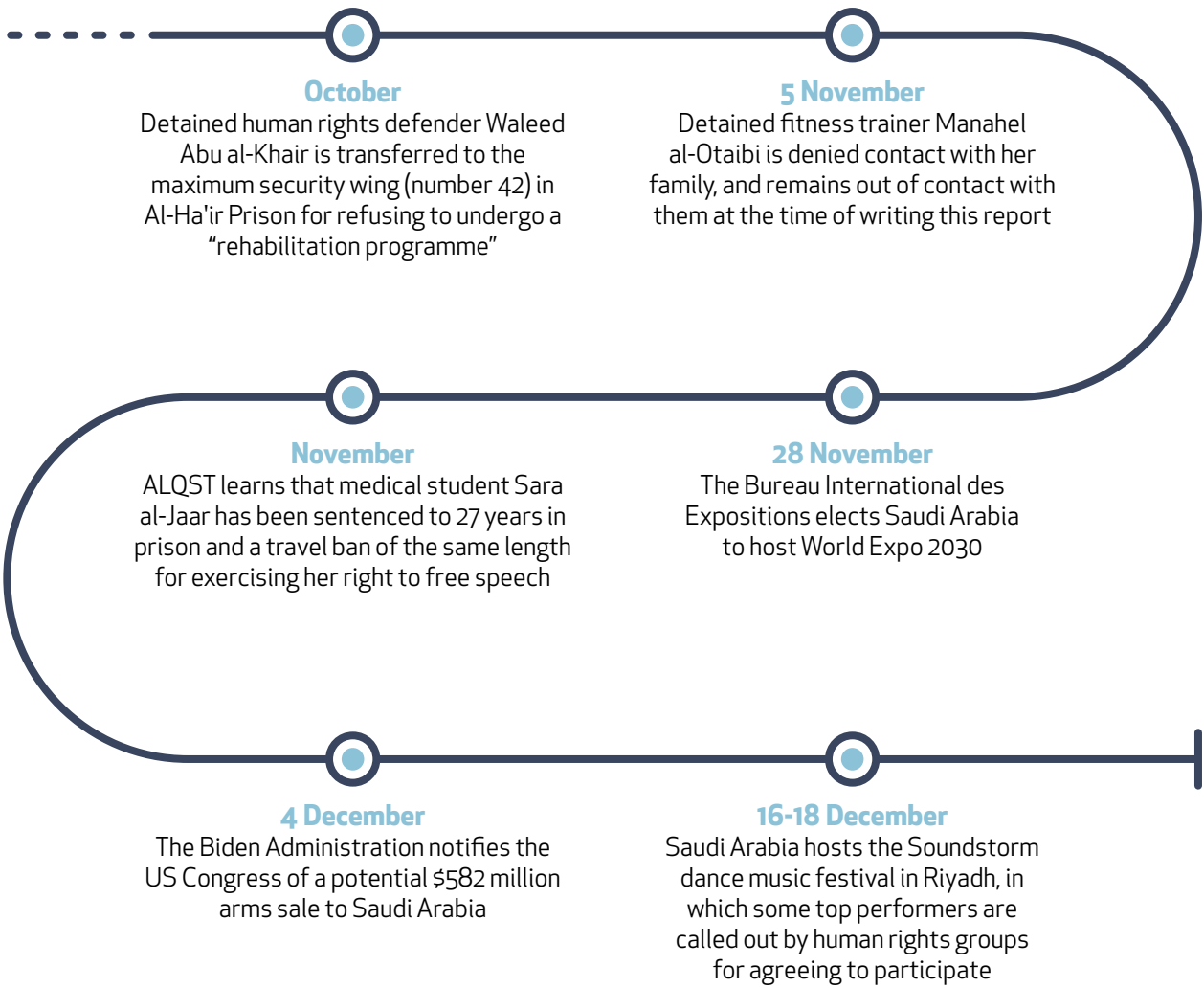














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