



# Through a Saudi Lens:

## Human Rights in Saudi Arabia in 2024



ALQST Annual Report  
February 2025



✉ Contact@ALQST.ORG ☎ 02073851311 🌐 ALQST.ORG 🐦 @ALQST\_ORG 📘 @ALQST.ORG

📍 Unit 24.7, Coda Studios, 189 Munster Rd, Fulham, London SW6 6AW | Registration no: 09093387

# Contents:

Introduction	04
Executive Summary	06
Saudi Arabia in the World	10
Legal Framework	17
Freedom of Expression Denied	20
Prisoners and Detainees at Risk	34
Conditional Releases and Travel Bans	39
Transnational Repression and Threats to Saudis in Exile	45
Use of the Death Penalty	49
Forced Evictions and Displacement	55
Women’s Rights	57
Migrant Workers’ Rights	61
Recommendations	65
Timeline of Human Rights-Related Events in Saudi Arabia in 2024	69

# Introduction

Welcome to this, ALQST's 10th Annual Report.

ALQST for Human Rights celebrated its tenth anniversary this year, if 'celebrate' is the right word to describe a decade of detailed monitoring and documentation of shocking rights violations by the Saudi Arabian authorities. Yet ALQST's tenacious and evidence-based advocacy for the basic rights of all Saudi citizens and residents, of all social, religious, political and regional backgrounds and beliefs, without discrimination, has succeeded in raising awareness internationally of the depressing catalogue of Saudi state abuses, while achieving many small victories along the way for individual victims.



This year we published the first-ever [survey](#) of its kind of the increasing numbers of Saudi nationals and long-time residents now living in exile, most of them driven from their home country by a stultifying lack of freedom and intolerance of diversity. Perhaps not surprisingly, the respondents' opinions and experiences affirmed and amplified the information ALQST has been gathering over the years through its extensive network of grassroots activists, victims of abuse and their families.

In this year's Annual Report there are crumbs of good news: several prisoners of conscience being released from jail, albeit after serving lengthy and unjust sentences, and still under harsh conditions such as travel bans. But horrifying new trends have also emerged, such as the rocketing number of executions carried out in 2024: 345 known individuals and possibly more, including 122 for non-violent drug-related offences.



ALQST is proud of the work it is doing, and proud of the courageous prisoners of conscience and activists living under almost impossible conditions in Saudi Arabia. But there is much, much more to do. Our asks to the Saudi authorities (see more in the recommendations section) are multiple, but many are simple measures that could be implemented swiftly, if there is sufficient political will. Despite opening up to western tourists, celebrities and businesses, for the rest of those living inside, Saudi Arabia is effectively a police state. Free speech is muzzled, and the authorities are shielded from any accountability whatsoever, an underlying issue that erodes many fundamental rights as a whole.

Moving forward into 2025, some of our main asks of the international community will therefore be to press the Saudi authorities to open up transparently to independent scrutiny, including by allowing access to the country for human rights organisations and UN experts. This has been totally denied so far, including in the context of the 2034 World Cup bid, that was granted to Saudi Arabia without any real stakeholder engagement. If they are serious about genuine reform, this is a prerequisite.

Please take the time to study this Annual Report and visit our website to see how you, whether Saudi or non-Saudi, can help support the cause of human rights for all in Saudi Arabia.

*Yahya Assiri, Founder of ALQST*

# Executive Summary

**Saudi Arabia in the world:** For world leaders dealing with Saudi Arabia in 2024, boosting trade and security ties seems to have outweighed human rights considerations at almost every step. At the United Nations, however, and among some legislators and business leaders around the world, there was some noteworthy scrutiny of the kingdom's appalling rights record. Led by its authoritarian ruler Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, Saudi Arabia continued to assert itself as a key player in regional and world affairs and build its influence as never before through the soft power of sports and entertainment, most visibly by being confirmed as host of the 2034 FIFA men's World Cup. Plans to make the futuristic megacity Neom one of five host cities for the tournament refocused attention on concerns for the safety and welfare of migrant construction workers there; and warnings of Saudi Arabia's unsuitability to host the UN-sponsored Internet Governance Forum in December proved to have been well-founded, as the proceedings were tainted by online hacks and censorship.

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

The Saudi authorities' **relentless suppression of free speech** saw no diminution during 2024. They continued to arbitrarily arrest people who peacefully exercised their right to freedom of expression, both online and offline, and other fundamental rights. Many prominent civil society figures having already been silenced by incarceration or intimidation, the authorities turned their attention in 2024 to targeting new groups within Saudi society, including football fans, social media influencers and successful creatives. News also continued to emerge of individuals arrested in previous years,

including foreign nationals. The Saudi courts continued to hand down decades-long sentences on peaceful activists and others for exercising the right of free speech. The fact such news can take a while to emerge, and sometimes contains little further information, reflects the prevailing climate of fear and the total lack of transparency around detention and judicial processes in the country. As such, the number of abuses monitored and described throughout the report is likely to represent only a fraction of the total.

**Prisoners and detainees at risk:** ALQST documented further examples in 2024 of the Saudi authorities' handling of certain prisoners whose lives they recklessly, if not deliberately, place at risk. Detained fitness instructor Manahel al-Otaibi faced horrific abuse in Malaz Prison; human rights defender Waleed Abu al-Khair was subjected to beatings by another inmate in Dhahban Prison, and was later denied a transfer to hospital for essential care in a deliberate act of medical neglect. For most of the year, prisoners of conscience Mohammed al-Qahtani and Essa al-Nukheifi were both victims of enforced disappearance, before being released at the beginning of 2025, long after the expiry of their sentences.

2024 saw several more **prisoners of conscience released** after completion of their prison sentences, but usually only on strict conditions that routinely included bans on travel, work and social media activity. The authorities also continued to impose "unofficial" travel bans not based on any judicial ruling or ministerial order, as well as arbitrary travel bans on detainees' family members, preventing them too from leaving the country, in a form of collective punishment.

The scale of the Saudi state's **transnational repression** was highlighted in a groundbreaking survey, published by ALQST in August 2024, of Saudi nationals in exile, *The Saudi Diaspora: A growing community of emigrés and refugees*. The way the Saudi authorities extend their repression beyond the kingdom's borders takes various forms, including extradition and requests for extradition, cybersurveillance, online harassment, and the unlawful travel bans discussed earlier in the report. Examples of all these tactics were documented by ALQST during the course of 2024, and several featured heavily in our diaspora report, which painted an illuminating picture of the repression and lack of freedom that has caused increasing numbers of Saudis to leave their country over the past decade. In a significant step in the fight against transnational repression, in October 2024 the High Court in London gave ALQST founder Yahya Assiri the go-ahead to serve a legal claim against Saudi Arabia over cyberattacks on him using Pegasus and QuaDream spyware.

The Saudi authorities' **escalating use of the death penalty** reached horrifying new levels in 2024, with at least 345 individuals executed during the year, by far the highest known figure in Saudi history. Forty percent of them were foreign nationals, from 15 Asian and African countries. A total of nine women were executed, also an all-time record. 122 individuals were executed for non-violent drug-related crimes, in clear violation of international human rights law. 50 more are known to have been sentenced to death for offences allegedly related to terrorism, which under the vague definition in Saudi law can include a wide range of non-lethal acts. ALQST remains deeply concerned that Saudi law still allows judges to impose death sentences on individuals for crimes committed as minors.

Saudi Arabia's controversial but successful bid to host the 2034 FIFA men's World Cup once again shone a spotlight on abuses in connection with the development of Neom and Jeddah Central, two of the five proposed host venues for the tournament.

**Arbitrary land seizures and forced displacement** are longstanding practices of Saudi Arabia's authorities and have accelerated in recent years, dramatically so in the case of Neom. Widescale forcible evictions have already taken place at both of these major development projects, drawing attention to the risk of similar violations taking place elsewhere during construction of the massive new infrastructure proposed for 2034.

**Women's rights:** In October 2024, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) expressed concern about "the persistence of discriminatory stereotypes against women and girls, reports on harassment and reprisals against women human rights defenders and activists, the maintenance of the death penalty, the persistence of the male guardianship system and the reluctance of the State party to withdraw its reservations to the [CEDAW] Convention." Ahead of the review, the Committee received submissions from local, regional and international civil society organisations, including a joint submission from ALQST and MENA Rights Group.

Under the Personal Status Law of 2022, women still need the consent of their male guardians to get married, and are expected to "obey" their husbands or, if not married, a male family member. A high proportion (25%) of the participants in ALQST's confidential survey of Saudi nationals in exile cited **domestic violence**, and the failure of the Saudi system to provide protection, as a factor that had driven them to seek safety abroad. The authorities meanwhile continue to target and punish women's rights activists, human rights defenders and even private individuals expressing



support for women's rights, which severely undermines the official narrative of women's empowerment.

A new law for **domestic workers** came into effect on 21 September 2024 offering several new protections for this vulnerable group, if implemented, but lacking enforcement mechanisms. Revised regulations on domestic workers who abscond were due to take effect in July 2024, though it is unclear whether they have yet been implemented. Despite these and other limited reforms in recent years, Saudi Arabia's notorious kafala (sponsorship) system remains substantially intact, with migrant workers of all kinds continuing to suffer routine abuse. Given the prevalence of **labour rights** violations in the country, the prospect of Saudi Arabia preparing to host the 2034 men's World Cup raises serious risks of labour exploitation on a massive scale, including worker deaths.

The Annual Report concludes with a set of detailed **recommendations** for the international community and for the Saudi authorities, and a **timeline** of events related to human rights in Saudi Arabia in 2024.

# Saudi Arabia in the World

Given Saudi Arabia's vast wealth, world leaders dealing with the country continued to prioritise their perceived material interests, while overlooking rights abuses committed by the authorities. At the United Nations, however, and among some Western legislators and business leaders, there was some noteworthy scrutiny of the kingdom's appalling rights record. Yet under the increasingly self-confident leadership of its authoritarian ruler, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, Saudi Arabia continued to assert itself as a key player in regional and world affairs and build its influence as never before through the soft power of sports and entertainment, most visibly by being confirmed as host for the 2034 FIFA men's World Cup.

## Diplomatic sidelining of Saudi rights concerns

2024 saw the continuing diplomatic rehabilitation of Mohammed bin Salman, after a brief period in disgrace over his role in the 2018 assassination of Jamal Khashoggi. In the United States, the Biden administration has been negotiating a sweeping [security agreement](#) with Saudi Arabia, the terms of which have not yet been made public, and in August 2024 confirmed it would resume the [sale of "offensive weapons"](#) to Saudi Arabia suspended for years over the kingdom's role in the Yemen conflict. More positively, following extensive efforts by ALQST and partners during a [trip to the US](#) in May, 32 Democrat Senators and Members of Congress [wrote](#) to US President Joe Biden and Secretary of State Antony Blinken urging them to press immediately for the unconditional release of prisoners of conscience in Saudi Arabia.

The new government that came to power in the **United Kingdom** in July 2024 has continued negotiations on a Free Trade Agreement with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf. This has so far been an opaque process, with no assurance that respect for human rights is among the list of its objectives. It was hoped that the incoming Labour government would do more than its predecessor to prioritise human rights in the UK's relationship with Saudi Arabia. However, Prime Minister Keir Starmer's trip to Saudi Arabia in December appeared to be dominated by a push for Saudi investment, with the government [press release](#) making only a vague reference to human rights.

The **European Union** (EU) has also been seeking closer ties with Saudi Arabia, and is in the process of negotiating partnership agreements. In August 2024, Mohammed bin Salman visited Brussels to attend the [EU-Gulf Cooperation Summit](#). On 17 December, the EU and Saudi Arabia held their [fourth Human Rights Dialogue](#), in Riyadh, with the EU expressing concerns about the rise in executions and restrictive environment for civil and political rights.

Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia was invited to join the **BRICS** block of major developing countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa and now others) from February 2024, but it has not yet formally done so.

## Saudi Arabia at the United Nations

Saudi Arabia received considerable scrutiny at the United Nations during 2024, especially in the context of its fourth cycle of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR). Following extensive engagement in the pre-UPR session in late 2023 from ALQST and partners, in January 2024, during Saudi Arabia's UPR itself, member states issued a comprehensive list of [recommendations](#) addressing widespread and systematic rights violations in the kingdom.



Saudi Arabia hears dozens of countries critique its human rights record at the UN in Geneva (AP)

On 4 July, Saudi Arabia gave the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) its formal response, accepting a high proportion (83%) of UN member states' recommendations, including some significant measures, but merely "noting" or formally rejecting many others equally vital. As we highlighted at the time, the Saudi authorities must now grant independent human rights observers [access to the country](#) in order to follow up on implementation of the recommendations and monitor the human rights situation on the ground.

In October and November respectively, Saudi Arabia was reviewed by the UN Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and Girls (CEDAW) (see "Women's Rights", [page 57](#)) and the Committee on the Elimination

of Racial Discrimination (CERD), for which we submitted reports along with MENA Rights Group.

Following extensive advocacy efforts from ALQST and partners, raising concerns about Saudi Arabia's bid for a seat on the HRC, on 9 October the kingdom failed to win election, a significant victory for human rights.



'A slap in the face to victims of abuse': UN urged to reject Saudi Arabia's bid to join Human Rights Council (*The Guardian*)

## Saudi Arabia's grip on world sport

The Saudi authorities further strengthened their [grip on world sport](#) during 2024, in what is widely seen as an effort to burnish their image and gain soft power around the world. This is particularly evident in the world of football, and on 11 December Saudi Arabia, as the sole bidder, was confirmed as host of the 2034 FIFA men's World Cup. FIFA's decision came despite the well-known and severe risks posed both to migrant workers and to Saudi citizens, risks that, as highlighted by [ALQST](#) and [partners](#), were not adequately addressed in Saudi Arabia's bid or [FIFA's own evaluation](#), falling far short of the Association's own requirements.



Saudi Arabia officially announced as the 2034 World Cup host. Human rights groups warn of 'unimaginable human cost' (*CNN*)

Part of the bid relied on a deeply flawed "Independent Context Assessment" on human rights, carried out by Riyadh-based law firm AS&H Clifford Chance, which was highly flawed. ALQST took part in an initiative to expose this, sending a [joint letter to the firm](#) expressing deep concern, which caused a stir within the firm itself.



'It's created an internal shitstorm': turmoil at UK law firm accused of 'whitewashing' Saudi World Cup report (*The Guardian*)

In April, FIFA announced a [three-year partnership](#) with Saudi Arabia's state-owned oil company, Aramco, giving the company sponsorship rights for the men's World Cup in 2026 and the women's World Cup in 2027. Following private outreach and meetings with several women footballers, ALQST, together with Amnesty International, organised a [letter](#) signed by more than 100 professional female footballers to FIFA, urging it to end its sponsorship deal with Aramco.



Top female footballers urge Fifa to end deal with Saudi 'nightmare sponsor' (*The Guardian*)

Much of the Saudi investment in sports comes through the Public Investment Fund (PIF), Saudi Arabia's sovereign wealth fund. Three years on from the 2021 PIF takeover of Newcastle United Football Club in the UK, [criticism](#) from civil society and fan groups has continued to grow, including around the local council's role. In October 2024, ALQST formally requested a [meeting](#) with Newcastle's new city council leader over Saudi Arabia's increasing influence in the city, receiving a positive response in November. Meanwhile, a proposal to [ban state ownership](#) of English football clubs has been submitted in an amendment to the Football Governance Bill, which remains under parliamentary review.

The Saudi authorities have taken a similar approach in a variety of popular sports worldwide, including Formula 1 motor racing, golf, tennis, boxing, and snooker. In April, the [women's professional tennis tour](#) (WTA) announced a three-year deal to hold its biggest event – the year-end WTA Finals – in Riyadh. As the 2024 event got underway in November, several [players expressed criticism](#). On 18 May, a heavyweight boxing fight between Tyson Fury and Oleksandr Usyk took place in Saudi Arabia, with players encouraged to [speak out](#). On 21 September, when a Saudi-organised fight between Anthony Joshua and Danuel Dubois was held in the UK, a British sports journalist who had written an article criticising the event was [barred](#) from the venue in a worrying breach of press freedom.



## Ongoing concerns over Neom

The Saudi kingdom continues to seek foreign investment in its ambitious economic plans, including several massive projects funded by the PIF. The crown prince's flagship gigaproject, Neom, has generated the most international attention, as well as the most serious doubts. On 19 November, ALQST published a [briefing paper](#) on the wide range of concerns regarding the project, including grave abuses in terms of the forced displacement and prosecution of the region's longstanding inhabitants (see "Forced Eviction and Displacement", [page 55](#)) and widespread labour rights abuses (see "Migrant Workers' Rights", [page 57](#)), as well as environmental and socioeconomic issues.

In light of these profound concerns, ALQST has been urging businesses involved, or considering involvement, in Neom and other projects in Saudi Arabia to use all the leverage at their disposal to advocate for the cessation of related rights abuses and take appropriate action to redress them. In May, a [UK-Saudi trade expo](#) took place in Riyadh following a fresh [investigation](#) by the BBC into abuses associated with the Neom project. Then-Deputy Prime Minister Oliver Dowden was reported to have raised the allegations with Saudi officials while visiting Riyadh for the event. Also in May, British green energy company Solar Water withdrew from a Neom contract after learning about abuses linked to the project, a testimony to ALQST's extensive monitoring and advocacy work over the past year.



Neom: Deputy PM Oliver Dowden raises futuristic city death with Saudi leaders  
(BBC)



ALQST's Lina  
Alhathloul with  
Solar Water's CEO  
Malcolm Aw, July  
2024

## UN Internet Governance Forum controversially held in Riyadh

Saudi Arabia was selected in late 2023 to host the 2024 UN-sponsored Internet Governance Forum (IGF), despite a [joint appeal](#) from 70 digital and human rights organisations. Ahead of the forum taking place in Riyadh from 15 to 19 December 2024, more than 40 civil society organisations [called](#) on Saudi Arabia to immediately release all people arbitrarily imprisoned for their online speech, a demand that was not met.

The forum marked a symbolic moment as a test of the Saudi authorities' readiness to grant uncensored access to the country. Representatives from Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch (HRW) attended in person, the first such NGO visits to the country in years. ALQST's Head of Monitoring and Advocacy, Lina Alhathloul, also participated online in an IGF session held jointly with HRW, but had to contribute remotely because of the severe risks for her of attending in person. HRW drew attention to her absence by symbolically placing her name card in front of an empty chair.

Concerns over Saudi Arabia's suitability to host the IGF proved to be well-founded, as sessions were tainted by [online hacks and censorship](#). After the joint HRW-ALQST session concluded, the video record [was deleted](#) from YouTube and the [transcript removed](#) from the IGF website, although the content was later restored. The IGF Secretariat confirmed that pressure had been exerted to have it removed, which raises serious concerns about interference and censorship on the part of the Saudi authorities.

In a separate session organised by digital rights organisation Access Now, the Zoom platform was [hacked](#) and pornographic content appeared on the screen, just after the killing of Jamal Khashoggi had been mentioned. The actual perpetrators of this outrage have not been identified, but Saudi Arabia's authorities bear responsibility for ensuring both online and offline security during events hosted within their jurisdiction.

Furthermore, [materials were confiscated](#) from a stand hosted by Amnesty International, attending the IGF in person. They had been displaying flyers highlighting the cases of Saudi women's rights activist Manahel al-Otaibi and Angolan TikTok star Neth Nahara, both detained for their online expression. The authorities' unwarranted

intervention both violated the right to free speech and undermined Amnesty's ability to raise awareness of critical human rights issues.



Activist tells Saudi-hosted UN forum of 'silencing' of dissent  
(France 24)

# 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](#)).

# Freedom of Expression Denied

The Saudi authorities' relentless suppression of free speech saw no diminution during 2024. They continued to arbitrarily arrest people who peacefully exercised their right to freedom of expression, both online and offline, and other fundamental rights. Many prominent civil society figures having already been silenced by incarceration or intimidation, the authorities turned their attention in 2024 to targeting new groups within Saudi society, including football fans, social media influencers and successful creatives.

## Chanting at football match brings Anti-Cybercrime Law charges and sentences

In a new assault on freedom of expression, thought and belief, Saudi police [summoned and arrested](#) supporters of Al Safa Football Club (Al Safa FC) for peaceful chanting at a match on 24 January that the authorities deemed "sectarian". This act of repression – curtailing the right to free speech in a football stadium, at a time when the authorities are heavily promoting interest in sport – once again highlights the discrepancy between their actions and the official narrative of liberalisation.

In the days following the match, the authorities summoned 150 members of Al Safa FC's supporters association for questioning; 12 of them were arrested and sent to Qatif General Prison. The 12 were later tried under Saudi Arabia's notorious Anti-Cybercrime Law on charges that included "sending material prejudicial to public order by means of the internet and electronic devices"; "prejudicing public order by kindling a spirit of sectarian fanaticism by passing on sectarian content in public gathering places"; "disturbing national unity"; and "coordinating this action in advance".

These charges related solely to the chanting of Shia religious folklore songs celebrating the birthday of Imam Ali (cousin of the Prophet Muhammad and deeply revered by Shia Muslims) during the match; they contained nothing insulting or hostile to anyone. The Public Prosecution based its accusations on video clips on social media from the match showing the crowd chanting the songs, and the fact that those arrested belonged to a football supporters' group on WhatsApp.

The Public Prosecution called for sentences of up to five years in prison and fines of up to three million riyals (\$800,000), confiscation of the defendants' phones, and closure of their phone and social media accounts. On 28 March, the Criminal Court in Dammam issued [preliminary rulings](#) against the 12 Al Safa fans, sentencing two of them to a year in prison and 10 of them to six months. On 26 April the court [reduced](#) the sentences of seven of them to three months, and they were released days later. All have since been released.

In addition to this persecution of individual fans, the club itself, based in Safwa City in the kingdom's Shia-majority Eastern Province, was harshly punished too. On 4 February, the Discipline and Ethics Committee of the Saudi Arabian Football Federation announced disciplinary measures against the club, noting that the fans had recited "phrases and chants that violated the provisions of the disciplinary and ethics regulations". The measures taken against Al Safa FC included dissolution of the club's board of directors together with administrative and financial penalties.



Saudi fans face jail for chanting at games in 'blatant violation of free speech'  
(The i)

## Targeting of Saudi influencers and creatives

The authorities' determination to stifle free speech in and beyond Saudi Arabia led them in 2024 to prosecute, jail and take other repressive measures against some of the kingdom's best creative talent, despite nursing ambitions to create a domestic film and media industry. Several notable artists, influencers and creatives were targeted for content that displeased the authorities, including for old social media posts.

In 2024, after a secret retrial, the Specialised Criminal Court of Appeal [resentenced political cartoonist Al Hazzaa](#) – full name Mohammed Ahmad Eid Al Hazzaa al-Ghamdi – to 23 years in prison. Al Hazzaa had been arrested on 13 February 2018 in connection with his work as a cartoonist for the



*Political cartoonist  
Al Hazzaa faces  
a 23-year prison  
sentence*

Qatari newspaper Lusail, and charged with offences that included “sympathising with Qatar”, “communicating with persons hostile to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia”, “producing, preparing and transmitting material prejudicial to public order through social media sites”, and opposing Saudi policy over the boycott imposed on Qatar by Saudi Arabia and allied states in 2017.

The Specialised Criminal Court (SCC), the Saudi court that handles terrorism-related cases, initially sentenced Al Hazzaa to six years in prison, reduced on appeal in September 2021 to three and a half years. Yet in 2024 the SCC Appeal Court drastically increased the penalty to 23 years, disregarding Al Hazzaa’s submissions in defence that he had been working for Lusail before Saudi Arabia cut ties with Qatar; that most of his work dealt with domestic Qatari affairs unrelated to tensions between the two countries; that Saudi-Qatari ties had been restored in 2021 through the signing of a reconciliation treaty; and that no evidence had been produced of the offending tweets for which Al Hazzaa was purportedly jailed.



Saudi Arabia jails cartoonist Mohammed al-Hazza for 23 years for insulting leadership, rights group says (CBS)

Other lengthy [punitive sentences for content creators](#) were either imposed or came to light in 2024. One of those targeted was Saudi-American filmmaker and creator of hit series Masameer **Abdulaziz al-Muzaini**, who, two years ago, was secretly prosecuted and sentenced by the SCC to 13 years in prison to be followed by a 30-year travel ban. Among the charges brought against him, it was alleged that al-Muzaini and his company, through Masameer, “sponsored and supported terrorism and homosexuality”, and that the language used in the animated comedy series included slurs and “insults”. Other charges were based on social media posts dating back more than a decade. Al-Muzaini is still waiting for the Supreme Court to give a final ruling on the case.

His case dates back to 2021, soon after Masameer was first released on Netflix, but was first revealed only on 26 June



Filmmaker  
Abdulaziz al-  
Muzaini faces an  
13-year prison  
sentence and  
30-year travel  
ban

2024, in a swiftly deleted 18-minute video addressed to Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. In the video, al-Muzaini described the repressive actions taken against him, and disclosed that following his conviction he had been forced to shut down his production company Myrkott (which has more than 2.5 million subscribers on YouTube) and terminate his staff's contracts. Within hours of publishing the video, al-Muzaini deleted it from YouTube and X, posted positive messages about the crown prince and the head of the General Authority of Media Regulation, and edited his X profile to read "A proud Saudi" instead of "A proud Saudi-American" – actions suggestive of coercive pressure on him.



Saudi producer says he was convicted over Netflix series  
(Middle East Eye)

The creators of [Thmanyah](#), one of the most widely followed podcast series in the world, with more than 3.6 million subscribers on YouTube, were also targeted by the authorities. Pro-government social media accounts kept [reporting](#) its online content to State Security, inviting it to arrest and punish its creators. **Hatem al-Najjar**, the presenter of popular podcast [Muraba](#) (Square) on the Thmanyah channel, was arrested in January 2024 amid an online campaign against him using the hashtag "Arrest\_Hatem\_Alnajjar". He was released on 16 February 2025 after more than a year of arbitrary imprisonment.

Others members of the Thmanyah team to be targeted include the presenter of the Adam podcast, **Mohammed al-Hajji**, a public health expert with a PhD from the United States. Al-Hajji was briefly detained in August 2023, reportedly for perceived criticism of the crown prince and support for women's rights. Similarly, podcaster and self-styled relationship counsellor **Yasser al-Huzaimi** faced online attacks, including being [falsely accused of being](#) a member of the Muslim Brotherhood,



Podcast  
presenter  
Hatem al-  
Najjar was  
arrested  
in January  
2024



after taking part in one of the most watched podcast episodes in the world in 2023, with [107 million views](#). In response, al-Huzaimi created a new account on X to refute these accusations and defend the Saudi government, saying that “all these political/ ideological groups and parties are wrong” and [declaring himself loyal](#) to the Saudi government.

Earlier in 2023, social media influencer **Mansour al-Raqiba** had been sentenced to 27 years in prison, according to court documents, over a secretly recorded video of him criticising Vision 2030, Mohammed bin Salman’s blueprint for diversifying the Saudi economy. Al-Raqiba has more than [2.3 million](#) followers on Snapchat and thousands more on other [social media](#) platforms. He was released on 12 February 2025 after more than two and a half years of arbitrary imprisonment.



*Social media influencer Mansour al-Raqiba was sentenced to a 27-year prison term. He was released in February 2025*

Since ending a 35-year [ban on cinemas](#) in 2018, the Saudi government has nursed ambitions to create a domestic film and media industry. The kingdom’s first cinema guild, the Film Association, was announced in December 2023, with a remit to “establish labour rights for cinema professionals”. Yet far from recognising filmmakers’ rights, the authorities remain determined to control content and stifle some of the kingdom’s best creative talent. Saudi Arabia’s creative industries will not thrive until the authorities recognise and fully respect the human rights of all its citizens to free speech, freedom of opinion and expression, freedom from arbitrary arrest and detention, and just, open and independent judicial proceedings.

## Other arbitrary arrests

The Saudi authorities’ repression often extends to family members of those who incur their wrath. In late March 2024, the authorities [arrested Saleh al-Alwan](#), brother of detained cleric Suleiman al-Alwan, from his home in Buraydah.

News also continued to emerge in 2024 of individuals arrested in previous years, including foreign nationals. ALQST learned in January that Yemeni national **Fahad Ramadan** had been [arrested](#) on 20 November 2023 while visiting Saudi Arabia, after private WhatsApp messages were leaked in which he criticised the crown prince. At the time, Ramadan was living in the Netherlands with his family as a refugee. Similarly, we learned of the [arbitrary arrest](#), because of tweets, of a Canadian citizen who has remained in pre-trial detention for over a year.

ALQST also learned in September 2024 of the [historic arrests and ongoing detention](#) of six individuals from Saudi Arabia's Jazan Province on the kingdom's southern border with Yemen, all of them having the same common local surname and four of them apparently with military connections. Five of the arrests took place within the past four years while one dates back over two decades. Little more is known about their cases, but all appear to relate to free speech or otherwise trivial reasons or unproven claims.

The longest standing of these six cases involves a soldier, **Othman Ahmed Qumayri Hakami**, who was arrested over 24 years ago, in 2000, following a raid on his home in a village in Jazan Province. It is not known whether he has yet been brought to trial or sentenced, but he appears to have been arbitrarily arrested after lending his mobile phone to a prisoner, in a prison where he may have been working, to allow them to contact their family. Now in his 40s, Othman has spent most of his life in prison, separated from his parents (who have since passed away) and siblings.

The other five men were arrested more recently. Student **Mohammed Sami Yahya Abbas Hakami** was arrested in about 2021 following a raid on his home, in a village in Jazan, after posting tweets. It is feared that he has since been sentenced to 15 years in prison. Similarly, **Othman Ali Zein Hakami**, a retired teacher in his 50s, was arrested in about 2022 after old tweets of his were found that allegedly supported the Muslim Brotherhood. He may have been sentenced to 20 years in prison.

**Bakr Abdulaziz Abdu Hakami**, a soldier in his 30s, was arrested in 2023 and accused of smuggling weapons to the Houthis, although no evidence was provided to support this claim, and it is not known whether he has been formally charged or brought to trial. **Ghalib Ahmed Abu Haddash Hakami**, a soldier at Jazan Port, was arrested in mid-2024, accused of possessing a weapon, which his family denies. His arrest may

instead have resulted from a conversation on WhatsApp. **Ahmed Uthman Mazayed Hakami**, a retired soldier in his 50s, was also arrested in mid-2024 in a home raid, following a conversation on WhatsApp in which he is thought to have criticised Royal Court adviser Turki Al Sheikh.

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

## Unfair trials and harsh sentences

Throughout 2024 the Saudi courts, notorious for their rampant abuses and disregard of legal safeguards, continued to hand down decades-long prison sentences on peaceful activists and other individuals. In an egregious and emblematic case that directly conflicts with the official narrative of women's empowerment (see "Women's Rights", [page 57](#)), on 9 January 2024 the SCC [sentenced](#) a 29-year-old fitness instructor and women's rights activist, **Manahel al-Otaibi**, to 11 years in prison because of her choice of clothing and support for women's rights, a sentence upheld in November. She was sentenced at a secret hearing, and the decision was only revealed weeks later through the Saudi government's formal [reply](#) to a request for information about her case in a [Joint Communication](#) by UN Special Rapporteurs.

The [charges](#) against her related solely to her choice of clothing and expression of her views online, including calling on social media for an end to Saudi Arabia's male guardianship system, publishing videos of herself wearing "indecent clothes", and "going to the shops without wearing an abaya" (a modest, long, loose robe). Her sister Fouz al-Otaibi faces similar charges, but fled Saudi Arabia fearing arrest after being summoned for questioning in 2022.

Absurdly, Manahel al-Otaibi was found guilty, according to Saudi Arabia's Permanent Mission in Geneva, of "terrorist offences" under Articles 43 and 44 of the kingdom's draconian Counter-Terrorism Law, which criminalise "[a]ny person who creates,

launches, or uses a website or a programme on a computer or on an electronic device ... to commit any of the crimes stipulated in this Law[or to publish information on the manufacture of incendiary devices, explosives, or any other devices used in terrorist crimes]”, as well as “[a]ny person who, by any means, broadcasts or publishes news, statements, false or malicious rumors, or the like for committing a terrorist crime”. Al-Otaibi’s family have not had access to her court documents, or the evidence presented against her. In prison, she has been wilfully exposed to repeated physical and psychological abuse (see “Detainees at Risk”, [page 34](#)).



Manahel al-Otaibi: Saudi women’s rights activist jailed for 11 years  
(BBC)

In positive news, in August Saudi Arabia’s Specialised Criminal Court of Appeal quashed the [death sentence](#) passed on 55-year-old retired teacher Mohammed bin Nasser al-Ghamdi in 2023 solely for his social media activity. Yet instead of being released, weeks later al-Ghamdi was resented to 30 years in prison. 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.



*Brothers Mohammed and Asaad bin Nasser al-Ghamdi were sentenced to 30- and 20-year prison terms respectively; Asaad was released in February 2025*

In July, Mohammed's brother, **Asaad bin Nasser al-Ghamdi**, was sentenced to 20 years in prison, also on charges related to his peaceful social media activity. He was released on 13 February 2025. Their other brother, Saeed bin Nasser al-Ghamdi is a government critic living in exile in the United Kingdom. He believes that the sentences against Mohammed and Asaad are acts of reprisal against him by the Saudi authorities, something frequently practised by the authorities.

Over the course of 2024, the SCC also handed down harsh jail terms on a number of other individuals over their peaceful activity. In May, the SCC [sentenced](#) two clerics detained since 2020, **Khidr al-Awami** and **Abbas al-Saeed**, to 25 and 27 years in prison for speeches they gave in support of human rights. And around the same time, the court passed a [30-year sentence](#) on cleric Amir al-Muhalhal, also detained since 2020, for peacefully exercising his right to freedom of expression.



*Clerics Khidr al-Awami and Abbas al-Saeed are under 25- and 27-year sentences respectively*



*Cleric Amir al-Muhalhal is serving a 30-year prison sentence*

## Ongoing trials and pre-trial detention

In late September, ALQST learned that **Salma al-Shehab** and **Nourah al-Qahtani**, serving 27- and 45-year prison terms respectively, were being unexpectedly brought for retrial on 25 September. ALQST and other human rights groups called on governments to [send monitors](#) to observe the trial hearings, although such monitors have repeatedly been denied access (see box below). News emerged several weeks later that al-Shehab's [sentence had been slashed](#) to four years plus four years suspended, and she was finally [released](#) on 10 February 2025.

In August 2022, the Saudi courts had handed down draconian sentences on al-Shehab and al-Qahtani based solely on their peaceful social media activity. Al-Shehab, a University of Leeds PhD student and mother of two, detained in January 2021 a few days before her planned return to the United Kingdom, was [sentenced to 34 years](#) in prison and a travel ban of the same length, reduced in 2023 to 27 years. Al-Qahtani, a mother of five and now over 50 years old, had her 13-year sentence increased to 45 years in prison.

Since then there has been significant advocacy in the UK around al-Shehab's case by trade unions, academics and the wider public. In March 2024, 340 academics, students and employees at the University of Leeds signed a [letter](#) calling on its leaders to take a stronger stand in her support.



Salma al-Shehab: Leeds University urged to act in case of Saudi Arabian student jailed for tweets (*Middle East Eye*)

In March 2024, ALQST learned that **Malik al-Dowaish**, whose father Sulaiman al-Dowaish has been forcibly disappeared since 2016 (see "Detainees at Risk", [page 34](#)), was to face a [new trial](#). Malik al-Dowaish was arrested in July 2022 in reprisal for his advocacy for his father, and later sentenced to 27 years in prison. His brothers Abdulrahman and Abdulwahhab are also in arbitrary detention for the same reason.



## Judicial proceedings and secret trial in Saudi Arabia

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

Since October 2018, Saudi Arabia's authorities have held secret trial proceedings, denying access to international observers, including embassy officials and foreign media, as well as the Saudi public. This contravenes Article 10 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states that "everyone is entitled in full equality to a fair and public hearing by an independent and impartial tribunal".


The presence of international observers does not alone guarantee a fair trial. Prior to October 2018, when embassy officials were generally permitted access, the Saudi authorities continued to hold grossly unfair trials and hand down lengthy prison sentences against peaceful dissidents. Yet the right to a fair trial involves the right to a public and open hearing, and this lack of access for international observers adds a further layer of secrecy to judicial proceedings in Saudi Arabia that are already marred by violations.

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

	Name	Area of activity	Date of arrest	Prison sentence
	Sabry Shalabi (Egyptian)	Journalist	1 August 2012	10 years

	Abdullah Jelan	University graduate	12 May 2021	10 years
	Issa al-Hamid	Human rights defender	16 September 2017	11 years
	Manahel al-Otaibi	Fitness instructor and women's rights activist	16 November 2022	11 years
	Wajdi al-Ghazzawi	Journalist	1 August 2012	12 years
	Mohammed al-Habib	Cleric	8 July 2016	12 years
	Israa al-Ghomgham	Human rights activist	December 2015	13 years
	Fadhel al-Manasef	Blogger and human rights activist	2 October 2011	14 years
	Adel Sayed Ibrahim Fakir	Head of the Nubian community in Riyadh	14 July 2020	14 years
	Waleed Abu al-Khair	Human rights defender	15 April 2014	15 years

	Essam al-Zamel	Economist	12 September 2017	15 years
	Mousa al-Hashim	Protester	6 December 2015	17 years
	Mohammed al-Oteibi	Human rights defender	24 May 2017	17 years
	Mohammed al-Rabiah	Human rights defender	15 May 2018	17 years
	Manal al-Gafiri	School student	2022	18 years
	Abdelrahman Farhaneh (Jordanian)	Journalist	22 February 2019	19 years
	Abdulrahman al-Sadhan	Humanitarian worker	12 March 2018	20 years
	Al Hazzaa	Political cartoonist	13 February 2018	23 years
	Khidr al-Awami	Cleric	11 November 2020	25 years

	Abbas al-Saeed	Cleric	11 November 2020	27 years
	Sara al-Jaar	Medical student	not known	27 years
	Saud al-Hashimi	Academic	2 February 2007	30 years
	Amir al-Muhalhal	Cleric	2020	30 years
	Mohammad bin Nasser al-Ghamdi	Retired teacher	11 June 2022	30 years
	Fatima al-Shawarb	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

# Prisoners and Detainees at Risk

ALQST documented further examples in 2024 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 2024, we again saw the Saudi authorities place the lives of targeted prisoners at risk through reckless negligence, including failure to protect them from other prisoners, as well as wilful mistreatment, enforced disappearance and deliberate medical neglect.

## Attacks on prisoners

Fitness instructor Manahel al-Otaibi faced further horrific abuse in Riyadh's Malaz Prison in 2024. Detained since November 2022, she had already been wilfully exposed to several [physical and psychological attacks](#), including beatings, bites and death threats from another inmate. On 14 April 2024, after months of enforced disappearance, she informed her family that she had a broken leg as a result of [further beatings](#), and was being denied medical visits. Later, in September, she was exposed to further [harrowing abuse](#), this time being stabbed in the face with a sharp pen by an unknown woman, for which she required stitches.



Saudi fitness instructor stabbed in face while jailed over women's rights posts  
(The Guardian)

While these attacks have not been directly inflicted by officials, the prison authorities have made no effort to protect al-Otaibi. Their actions go well beyond mere negligence, because when she notified prison officials they prevented her from filing a complaint and placed her in solitary confinement. In another example, in January 2024 human rights defender **Waleed Abu al-Khair** was subjected to [beatings](#) by another inmate in Dhahban Prison.



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

The prison authorities' cynical failure to protect Manahel al-Otaibi 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.

## Denial of medical treatment

The lives of prisoners in Saudi jails are sometimes further endangered through the deliberate denial of medical treatment, which has led to a number of deaths in detention in recent years, notably that of iconic human rights defender **Abdullah al-Hamid** in April 2020. In a further tragic case, in 2024 **Ahmed al-Sultan**, an engineer in his 50s arrested two years previously, [died in jail](#) after the Saudi authorities ignored his urgent need for health care. In the absence of transparency, little more information is so far known.

Human rights defender **Waleed Abu al-Khair**, in jail since 2014 serving a 15-year sentence for his activism, has repeatedly faced various forms of ill-treatment, including medical neglect. In March, the authorities [refused to transfer](#) Abu al-Khair to hospital, depriving him of essential medical care.



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

## Shrouded in secrecy: Saudi Arabia's prison system

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

No independent monitoring of prison conditions is currently permitted in Saudi Arabia, and the authorities refuse to cooperate with United Nations bodies, denying country access to UN special procedures mandate holders. During the kingdom's 2024 Universal Periodic Review (UPR) before the Human Rights Council, several states called on the Saudi authorities to accept such visits.

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

## Enforced disappearances

The practice of enforced disappearance is systematic and widespread in Saudi Arabia, and continued to be applied by the Saudi authorities in 2024 to prisoners of conscience, including some due for release. In early November, after more than two years of enforced disappearance, detained human rights defender **Mohammed al-Qahtani** was finally [able to contact his family](#), and was subsequently [conditionally released](#) (see "Conditional Releases and Travel Bans", [page 39](#)). Despite completing

his 10-year prison sentence in November 2022, from October that year he was forcibly disappeared, with the authorities failing to clarify his fate and whereabouts, and instead providing inadequate and misleading information.

In a [flagrant attempt to mislead](#) the outside world, in May 2024 the Saudi Human Rights Commission (SHRC) President, Hala al-Tuwaijri, told US diplomats that al-Qahtani was in contact with his family and had spoken to them on the phone in recent days; she denied that he was in a state of enforced disappearance. Al-Qahtani's wife issued a [statement](#) categorically refuting al-Tuwaijiri's claim, and accused the state-backed SHRC of covering up violations by the authorities.

Similarly, detained activist and prisoner of conscience **Essa al-Nukheifi** was forcibly disappeared from 15 October 2022 after he declared a hunger strike in protest over not being released when his six-year jail sentence expired, in September 2022. Al-Nukheifi was denied any contact with the outside world until suddenly being released on 5 January 2025 (see "Conditional Releases and Travel Bans", [page 39](#)).

## Longstanding cases of enforced disappearance

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

Humanitarian worker **Abdulrahman al-Sadhan** was arrested by secret police in March 2018 from his workplace at the headquarters of the Saudi Red Crescent in Riyadh and forcibly disappeared for 23 months. He was sentenced in April 2021 to 20 years in jail for peaceful comments posted on Twitter, and since an appeal court appearance in August of that year has been forcibly disappeared again. The authorities have denied al-Sadhan any contact with his family for over three 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 outside the protection of the law. Preacher **Sulaiman al-Dowaish** has been forcibly disappeared since being arrested on 22 April 2016, after tweeting comments critical of King Salman and Prince Mohammed bin Salman, and being brutally tortured by high-ranking officials at an unofficial place of detention in Riyadh. The last reported sighting of al-Dowaish was in July 2018; since then there has been no news of him or his health or whereabouts.

# Conditional Releases and Travel Bans

2024 saw several more prisoners of conscience released after completion of their prison sentences, but usually only on strict conditions that routinely included arbitrary bans on travel, work and social media activity. The authorities also continued to impose “unofficial” travel bans not based on any judicial ruling or ministerial order, as well as arbitrary travel bans on detainees’ family members, preventing them too from leaving the country, in a form of collective punishment.

## Prisoners released

In mid-2024, writer and academic **Abdullah al-Maliki** was released following the expiry of his sentence. He was arrested in September 2017 and sentenced to seven years in prison on charges including “possession of banned books”.

In June, journalist and writer **Sultan al-Jumairi** was [released](#) after spending almost six years in prison. He was arrested in September 2018 after being summoned from Canada. Despite being told he was not on any wanted list, he was arrested on arrival at the airport.

Also in June, journalist **Ahmad al-Sawian** was [released](#) after spending almost seven years in prison. He was arrested in September 2017 during a crackdown on dissent, and sentenced based on charges relating to free speech. On 19 July, singer **Rabee Hafez** was [released](#) after spending almost seven years in prison. And in late October, journalist **Jamil Farsi** was released after spending over seven years in prison. Both were also arrested in the September 2017 crackdown.

In December, three more individuals detained in the September 2017 wave of arrests, **Malik al-Ahmad**, **Mohammed al-Khudairi**, and **Mohammed al-Habdan**, were [released](#). In the same month, blogger **Dawood al-Ali** was also released under conditions that remain unclear. Al-Ali, arrested in December 2020 following tweets in which he rejected normalisation with Israel, was subsequently sentenced to 25 years in prison.


Most recently, in the first few days of 2025, Saudi human rights defenders **Mohammed al-Qahtani** and **Essa al-Nukheifi** were [conditionally released](#) after years of arbitrary imprisonment on the basis of their peaceful activism and more than two years' delay since the completion of their prison terms. Although freed from prison, they remain under lengthy travel bans, which in al-Qahtani's case cruelly separates him from his wife and five children in the United States.









A further wave of releases followed in February 2025. On 10 February, **Salma al-Shehab** (see page 26) was released, and two days later **Mansour al-Raqiba** (page 21) was released as well as a group of individuals set free from Al-Mabaheth prison in Dammam, including nurse **Zeinab al-Rabea**, who was arrested in June 2022 over social media posts. On 13 February, **Asaad bin Nasser al-Ghamdi** (page 24) was released from Dhahban Prison, and blogger **Ahmed al-Budaiwi** was let out after almost three years in prison for a Facebook post about the mass execution of 81 men in March 2022. On 14 February, blogger **Abdulaziz al-Odah** was released after over four years in prison over social media posts, and on 16 February podcast presenter **Hatem al-Najjar** was released after more than a year of arbitrary imprisonment.

## 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, normally for the same additional length of time as the prison term itself.

*A selective list of conditionally released Saudi prisoners of conscience under court-imposed travel bans*

	Name	Area of activity	Date of release	Duration of travel ban
	Essam Koshak	Human rights activist and computer engineer	January 2021	Four years

	Nassima al-Sadah	Woman human rights defender	27 June 2021	Five years
	Samar Badawi	Woman human rights defender	27 June 2021	Five years
	Naima al-Matrood	Woman protester	11 February 2022	Six years
	Nadhir al-Majed	Writer	23 July 2022	Seven years
	Alaa Brinji	Journalist	February 2021	Eight years
	Murtaja Qureiris	Child protester	24 June 2022	Eight years
	Abdulrahman al-Hamid	Academic and human rights defender	9 January 2023	Nine years
	Dawoud al-Marhoun	Child protester	2 February 2022	10 years
	Raif Badawi	Blogger	11 March 2022	10 years



	Ali al-Nimr	Child protester	27 October 2021	10 years
	Abdullah al-Zaher	Child protester	14 November 2021	10 years
	Fahad al-Fahad	Human rights defender	3 February 2022	10 years
	Abdulkarim al-Khodr	Academic and human rights defender	7 January 2023	10 years
	Fawzan al-Harbi	Human rights defender	Late 2023	10 years
	Mohammed al-Qahtani	Human rights defender and academic	7 January 2025	10 years
	Abdul Rahman al-Shumayri	Academic	23 September 2021	15 years
	Essa al-Nukheifi	Human rights activist	5 January 2025	Four years

In addition to these court-ordered travel bans, the authorities also impose “unofficial” travel bans without notification of any legal justification, judicial ruling or official decision behind them. **Loujain al-Hathloul**, a woman human rights defender and leading voice for women’s rights in Saudi Arabia, has faced arbitrary administrative restrictions since her release from prison in February 2021. Her criminal sentence included a travel ban to follow her release of two years and 10 months, which was due to expire on 12 November 2023. Yet since then she has remained unable to travel, without formal notification from the Saudi authorities of any new or ongoing ban, either criminal or administrative, that she can contest.

Since travel bans like these are unofficial and lack any stated legal basis, there is no way to formally appeal against them or apply to have them lifted. Al-Hathloul is currently filing an appeal in response to the latest round of bureaucratic stalling in her quest to lift the unlawful travel ban imposed on her. In December 2023 she filed a judicial complaint against the Presidency of State Security, challenging her travel ban and calling for it to be lifted. However, when her complaint came before the Diwan al-Mazalem (Board of Grievances, an administrative court) nine months later, on 10 September 2024, the proceedings were perfunctory and failed to address her case. When the judge asked State Security for their response to al-Hathloul’s complaint, they simply said they had not received the case documents. At that point the judge declared himself incompetent to hear the complaint and closed the case for lack of jurisdiction.

Activist **Maryam al-Otaibi** is also [trapped 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 official Saudi Human Rights Commission (SHRC), but so far without success.

In a [letter](#) to the Saudi authorities in March 2024, a group of distinguished United Nations experts formally enquired about the legal grounds on which they had banned al-Hathloul and al-Otaibi from travelling abroad, and expressed concern about this reported administrative harassment. The Saudi authorities’ [response](#), rejecting the UN experts’ concerns, was [totally unsatisfactory](#).

Travel bans have [serious consequences](#) for the victims’ lives, preventing them from pursuing personal and professional goals abroad, accessing specialist healthcare,

or visiting family members outside the country. This in turn can have a profound impact on the physical, mental and emotional well-being of both the individuals directly affected and their families.

The Saudi authorities have also been making increasing use of arbitrary travel bans on family members of activists, including the rest of the al-Hathloul family in Saudi Arabia. This appears to be a form of collective punishment, but is also intended to further deter people from engaging in human rights work, for the sake of not only their own safety but that of their relatives. [Appeals](#) to the SHRC from Saudi nationals living abroad to help lift arbitrary travel bans on their relatives inside the kingdom have repeatedly fallen on deaf ears.



Saudi Arabia is rebranding itself as a moderate country, but what's the truth?  
Just ask our female activists (*The Guardian*)

## 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.

# Transnational Repression and Threats to Saudis in Exile

The scale of the Saudi state's transnational repression was highlighted in a groundbreaking survey published by ALQST in August 2024, [The Saudi Diaspora: A growing community of emigrés and refugees](#). The way the Saudi authorities extend their repression beyond the kingdom's borders takes various forms, including extradition and requests for extradition, cybersurveillance, online harassment, and the unlawful travel bans discussed elsewhere in this Annual Report.

Examples of all these tactics were documented by ALQST during the course of 2024, and several featured heavily in our diaspora report, which painted an illuminating picture of the repression and lack of freedom that have caused increasing numbers of Saudis to leave their country over the past decade. It also examined the challenges these exiles face in relation to their legal situation and career prospects, as well as forms of transnational repression including cybersurveillance and harassment from online trolls.



Huge spike in Saudi Arabians seeking asylum since 2013, survey finds  
(Middle East Eye)

## Extradition to and from Saudi Arabia

One of the tactics the Saudi authorities use, as part of a pattern of intimidation and reprisals against peaceful activists, is extradition. As well as bringing fabricated criminal charges against Saudi individuals abroad to facilitate their extradition to Saudi Arabia, they have sometimes arrested and extradited foreign nationals at the request of other repressive governments.

The Egyptian citizen **Ahmed Fathi Kamal Kamel**, for example, was arrested in Saudi Arabia on 13 November 2024 following an extradition request by Egypt, and is currently detained in Jeddah, facing [imminent risk of extradition](#). Kamel took part non-violently in the Arab Spring protests in Egypt in 2011 and 2014, and was shot twice, arrested, detained and subjected to torture. Upon being released on bail in 2014 he managed to flee to Saudi Arabia, where he has resided since. If returned to Egypt, where he faces a 25-year prison sentence for his involvement in the protests, he would be at high risk of torture and other grave violations of his rights. His extradition would in itself constitute a violation of the principle of non-refoulement enshrined in Article 3 of the Convention against Torture, which Saudi Arabia ratified in 1997.

In an earlier case, Saudi national Hassan al-Rabea was arrested at Marrakesh Airport on 14 January 2023 while attempting to travel to Turkey, following the issuance of a provisional arrest warrant at the request of the Saudi authorities for reasons related to his religious beliefs and his family's history of political activism. Weeks later, despite repeated calls from civil society to prevent the move, al-Rabea was [extradited from Morocco](#) and forcibly returned to Saudi Arabia, where he was arrested and forcibly disappeared for months. He remains in detention awaiting trial.



*Egyptian citizen  
Ahmed Fathi  
Kamal Kamel  
is at imminent  
risk of forced  
deportation from  
Saudi Arabia to  
Egypt*

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

Amid mounting repression in recent years, increasing numbers of Saudis have left the country and sought asylum abroad in order to seek freedom or escape grave violations of their rights by the Saudi state. Yet the authorities in other states are not always aware of the risks to peaceful, law-abiding activists and government critics in Saudi Arabia, and such individuals can risk being deported back to the kingdom in violation of the host states' obligations under international law. A recent example is the case of Saudi activist **Abdulrahman al-Khalidi**, who is under a non-appealable [order of deportation](#) from Bulgaria to Saudi Arabia, where he would be at substantial

risk of persecution, including arbitrary arrest, torture, and an unfair trial likely to result in a lengthy prison term, due to his political views and activism.

Al-Khalidi left Saudi Arabia in 2013, having received numerous threats as a result of his peaceful online activity and campaigning for constitutional reform. 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. On 7 February 2024, after more than two years going through the asylum process in Bulgaria, al-Khalidi was notified of a deportation order against him, which his lawyers appealed. However, on 25 October, the Administrative Court in Sofia issued a non-appealable decision to return him to Saudi Arabia, placing him at imminent risk of deportation.

Al-Khalidi's deportation to Saudi Arabia would constitute a grave violation of Bulgaria's commitments under international, European Union and domestic law, including its own constitution, which states that Bulgaria shall grant asylum to foreigners persecuted for their opinions and activity in defence of internationally recognised rights and freedoms.

For now, al-Khalidi is being held in administrative detention in Busmantsi Detention Centre near Sofia International Airport. While in detention, al-Khalidi has suffered medical neglect of his untreated back problems, and he is currently not getting sufficient psychological support for his deteriorating mental health.



Saudi activist held in Bulgaria 'hours or days' from deportation, lawyers fear  
(Middle East Eye)

## Cybersurveillance and attacks

In recent years the Saudi authorities' sweeping repression has increasingly extended to the online space. The internet and digital communications have been weaponised not only within the country but also outside it, with the authorities infiltrating and using foreign companies to spy on individuals and carry out cybersurveillance.

The most notorious case to date, which is still being pursued in the British courts, involved Israeli spyware company NSO Group. As highlighted by the Pegasus Project's findings published in July 2021, the Saudi authorities used NSO's highly



invasive Pegasus spyware to launch cyberattacks against innocent activists abroad, in a bid to secretly gather and extract data. Known targets of this surveillance spyware include ALQST's founder, Yahya Assiri.



UK 'turning a blind eye' to threats to kill Saudi activists living in exile  
(Reuters)

In October 2024, in a significant step in the fight against transnational repression and misuse of surveillance technology, the High Court in London gave Assiri the [go-ahead to serve a legal claim](#) against Saudi Arabia over cyberattacks on him using Pegasus and QuaDream spyware. Assiri is claiming misuse of his private information, harassment, and wrongful interference with his mobile phones by the Saudi state. By granting him permission to serve his claim, the Court has agreed there is an arguable case to be made.



UK-based dissident can sue Saudi Arabia for alleged spyware, court rules  
(Reuters)

# Use of the Death Penalty

Saudi Arabia's escalating use of the death penalty reached horrifying new levels in 2024, with at least 345 individuals executed during the year, by far the highest known figure in Saudi history and more than double the number executed in 2023. This grim milestone vividly illustrates the Saudi authorities' callous disregard for the human right to life and confutes their pledges to limit use of the death penalty. It also intensifies fears for those at risk of execution, including child defendants and countless foreign nationals.

In the course of Saudi Arabia's 2024 Universal Periodic Review (UPR) at the United Nations, the Saudi authorities accepted only one of the [22 recommendations](#) made relating to their use of the death penalty, clearly demonstrating their lack of commitment to meaningful reform.

## A record number of executions in 2024

Of the 345 individuals publicly reported as having been executed in 2024, based on data from the official Saudi Press Agency, 208 (60%) were Saudi nationals. The 137 foreign nationals executed were from 15 Asian and African countries, with the highest numbers coming from Yemen (26), Pakistan (25), Egypt (17), Jordan (17), Syria (16) and Nigeria (14).

A total of nine women were executed, the highest known figure in Saudi history. During Saudi Arabia's October 2024 review by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, the Committee urged the Saudi authorities to [halt the execution of all women](#) currently on death row.



Saudi executions double in 2024 as more women and foreigners put to death  
(Middle East Eye)

In 2024, 173 people were executed for murder and other violent crimes. A further 122, of whom 92 were foreign nationals, were executed for drug-related crimes, all on the basis of ta'zir (judicial discretion – see box below). This marks a sharp rise from 2023, which saw just two drug-related executions, and confirms the reversal of a [short-lived moratorium](#) on executions for such offences that lasted from January 2021 until November 2022 but was never consolidated in an official change of policy. This regressive trend raises serious concerns for the lives of [hundreds of prisoners](#) sentenced to death for drug-related offences. Such executions are in clear violation of international human rights law, which prohibits use of the death penalty for crimes that do not meet the threshold of the “most serious”.

A large number of the drugs cases relate to the smuggling of Captagon, an addictive amphetamine-style narcotic substance. Prior to its fall in December 2024, the Assad regime in Syria was notoriously the world's prime producer and exporter of Captagon pills, with large quantities of the drug reaching neighbouring countries, primarily Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states, where it has been causing far-reaching social problems. In April 2023, the Saudi Ministry of Interior launched a ferocious anti-drug campaign called “On the Lookout”, which granted security forces sweeping powers to crack down on suspected drug users, regardless of the quantities involved. There were reports of widespread violations in relation to the campaign, including indiscriminate mass raids and arrests, and detainees being held incommunicado.

The remaining 50 individuals known to have been executed in 2024 were sentenced to death for offences allegedly related to “terrorism”, which according to the vague and broad definition in Saudi law can include a wide range of non-lethal acts, as well as charges such as “betraying one's country”. A flagrant example of the authorities' determination to treat [legitimate dissent and protest as a form of terrorism](#) was the implausible claim made by the Ministry of Interior that Abdulmajeed Al Nimr, a 59-year-old Shi'a executed on 17 August, had joined a terrorist cell affiliated to the vehemently anti-Shia group Al-Qaeda. Court documents reviewed by ALQST relating to Al Nimr's trial and preliminary sentencing made no mention of any link with Al Qaeda, as highlighted by the Ministry of Interior in a statement, which suggests that the Ministry was deliberately misrepresenting the facts of the case for [political purposes](#). Many of the charges, on which Al Nimr was tried were in fact related to the exercise of fundamental rights such as freedom of speech and taking part in protests.

39 of the executions carried out in 2024 for “terrorism-related” offences did not specify the basis on which the death penalty had been applied, adding a further layer of opacity to the sentencing process.

## **Hudud, qisas, ta’zir: The three bases on which Saudi judges may apply the death penalty**

### ***Hudud***

Hudud crimes are specific offences that carry prescribed penalties in Islamic law, as interpreted by a judge, for some of which the penalty is death.

### ***Qisas (requital, a form of retributive justice)***

Qisas is what the Qur’an prescribes as punishment for someone who has deliberately committed murder, unless the victim’s blood relatives waive their right (and it is not the government’s right) to avenge the killing. Religious scholars broadly agree that the blood relatives are free to either waive or exercise their right to requital by demanding the killer’s execution.

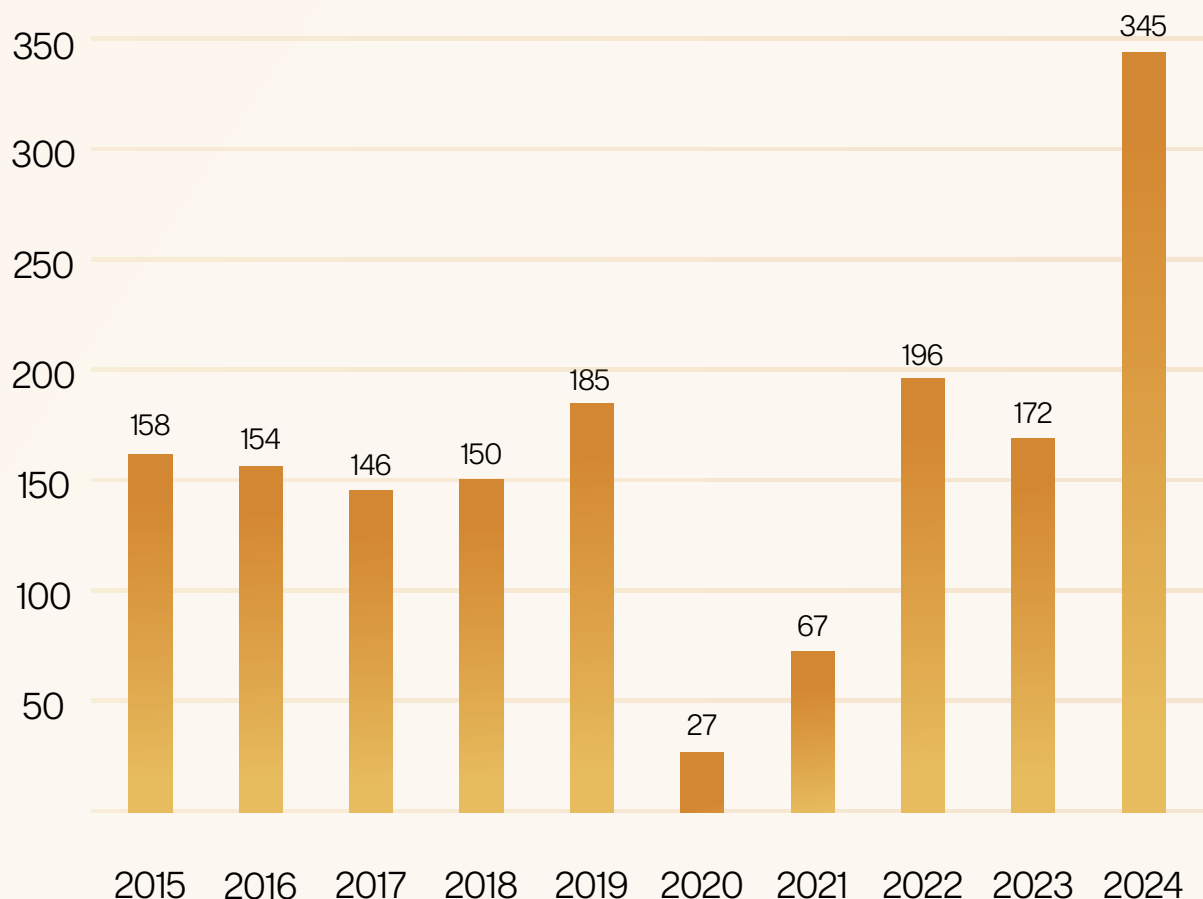
### ***Ta’zir***

In the absence of a codified criminal law in Saudi Arabia, if cases do not involve specified hudud crimes, and where the concept of qisas does not apply, there is no clear rationale for sentencing once a guilty verdict is reached, and it is left to the judge’s discretion to decide the appropriate penalty. Most religious scholars do not accept that ta’zir, judicial discretion, extends to the death penalty, but the Saudi authorities insist on giving judges the power to hand down death sentences on anyone as they see fit, according to their own personal judgement. Ta’zir sentences are extensively handed down for crimes, including drug-related offences, that do not meet the threshold of the “most serious” under international law.

## 2024 in historical perspective

Saudi Arabia has for years been among the countries carrying out the highest number of executions in the world. Despite a [pledge](#) in 2018 from Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman to reduce use of the death penalty, the rate of executions has continued to soar, apart from a relative lull during the coronavirus pandemic. As recently as March 2022, Mohammed bin Salman [repeated the commitment](#) to limit use of the death penalty, yet that year saw a then-record-breaking number of people executed – 196 individuals – and in 2023 the authorities carried out at least 172 known executions. However, the figure for 2024 is by some distance the highest ever recorded in Saudi history. In the absence of transparency, and with executions sometimes carried out in secret, the real figures may be even higher.

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



## Minors still at risk of execution

ALQST remains deeply concerned that Saudi law still allows judges to impose death sentences on individuals for crimes committed as minors, in direct violation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, to which Saudi Arabia is a party. At least nine young people are currently [at risk of execution](#) for offences committed under the age of 18, sometimes as young as 12. The majority were convicted by the Specialised Criminal Court under the draconian Counter-Terrorism Law for acts protected by the rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, including participating in protests and attending funerals. The young men's sentences all followed grossly unfair trials that failed to meet basic standards of due process, including by denying them legal counsel and access to criminal files, and admitting coerced confessions as evidence in court.

In April 2024, the Specialised Criminal Court of Appeal [upheld](#) the death sentences imposed against two child defendants, **Youssef al-Manasef** and **Ali al-Mabiyouq**. Their cases were therefore referred to the Supreme Court which will render a final judgment. The young men were subjected to grave violations while in detention, including enforced disappearance, solitary confinement, and various forms of torture.

### Empty promises regarding the death penalty for juveniles

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

In April 2020 the Saudi Human Rights Commission (SHRC), the principal official source on the matter, stated that the decree covered the sentencing



of juveniles for [any crime, including terrorist offences](#). If implemented, this would have marked a measure of progress. Six months later, after human rights organisations had publicised the flaws in the still unpublished decree, the SHRC [insisted](#) once again that “no one in Saudi Arabia will be [executed](#) for a crime committed as a minor”. Yet these official assurances were completely undermined by the execution in June 2021 of Mustafa Hashem al-Darwish for teenage protests, and then the passing of further death sentences on juvenile offenders in 2022 and the upholding of several others on appeal in 2022, 2023 and 2024.

## Others at risk of execution

The death penalty is not only applied by the Saudi courts as punishment for crimes but also weaponised as part of the authorities’ broader campaign of repression, including as a tool to clamp down on dissent. At least **five members of the Huwaitat tribe** have been [sentenced to death](#) for peacefully resisting the forced displacement of their tribe to make way for the state-backed Neom megacity project (see following section on Forced Evictions and Displacement). In another example of the authorities’ willingness to use capital punishment to suppress free speech, in July 2023 the SCC, the court that handles terrorism cases, [sentenced](#) retired teacher **Mohammed bin Nasser al-Ghamdi** to death solely for peaceful tweets. The court later commuted his sentence to a 30-year prison term.

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

## Families left in the dark

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

# Forced Evictions and Displacement

Saudi Arabia's controversial but successful bid to host the 2034 FIFA men's World Cup once again shone a spotlight on abuses associated with the development of Neom and Jeddah Central, two of the five proposed host venues for the tournament. Arbitrary land seizures and forced displacement are longstanding practices of Saudi Arabia's authorities and have accelerated in recent years, dramatically so in the case of Neom. Widescale forcible evictions have already taken place at both of these major development projects, drawing attention to the risk of similar violations taking place elsewhere during construction of the massive new infrastructure being proposed for 2034.

## Neom, the megacity

Saudi Arabia's 2034 World Cup Bid Book states that one of the five host cities for the 2034 tournament will be Neom, a vast futuristic project on Saudi Arabia's Red Sea coast in the province of Tabuk, and the biggest of several gigaprojects being developed as part of Vision 2030. It will include a new stadium and related infrastructure situated in "The Line", the proposed 170 km-long, 200 metre-wide linear city forming the centrepiece of Neom megacity. Little of the project or its infrastructure has yet been constructed, and much scepticism has been expressed about its feasibility.

While Neom's spokespeople and early promotional videos described the area earmarked for the project as "virgin land", it has in fact been inhabited for centuries, primarily by the Huwaitat tribe's approximately 20,000 members. First-hand [research](#) by ALQST revealed that in order to proceed with the construction of Neom, the Saudi authorities committed a wide range of serious human rights abuses even before the project was announced, including illegally dispossessing the region's inhabitants of their properties and forcibly evicting them from their homes. Once forcibly evicted, many were denied adequate compensation or alternative housing, and were forced to buy into poorer areas of Tabuk.

In the process one man, Abdul Rahim al-Huwaiti, was shot dead by security forces in April 2020. Scores of other Huwaitis peacefully resisting the tribe's forcible

displacement and speaking out against the injustices inflicted on them were arrested and tried under the kingdom's Counter-Terrorism Law; at least 15 so far have been given prison sentences ranging from 15 to 50 years, and five sentenced to death.

## **Jeddah Central**

The \$20 billion Jeddah Central development aims to remodel several neighbourhoods in the historic port city of Jeddah and construct, among other things, a museum, an opera house and the sports stadium featured in the World Cup bid. Jeddah is another of the five proposed host cities.

Large-scale evictions and demolitions in relation to the Jeddah Central project began in October 2021 and continued until at least 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, [research](#) carried out by ALQST, as well as findings from partner NGOs, painted a very different picture, showing their devastating impact and grave violations of international human rights standards. Contrary to the claims of the authorities, many of the residents received no advance notice of the demolitions, and many were forced out under threat of being sent to prison if the eviction orders were not carried out, regardless of their having proof of ownership of their properties.

Although the Saudi authorities belatedly launched a compensation scheme in January 2022, many of the displaced were not given clear information on how to claim for compensation, or given any money or assistance in obtaining alternative accommodation. The compensation scheme in fact applied only to property-owning Saudi nationals, excluding and discriminating against the many foreign nationals living in the area. Others reported difficulty in finding alternative accommodation and schools for their children, as well as higher rents and living costs.

# Women's Rights

In October 2024, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), in its [Concluding Observations](#) on Saudi Arabia's fifth periodic report, expressed concern about "the persistence of discriminatory stereotypes against women and girls, reports on harassment and reprisals against women human rights defenders and activists, the maintenance of the death penalty, the persistence of male guardianship system and the reluctance of the State party to withdraw its reservations to the [CEDAW] Convention... The Committee notes with concern the limited progress made in addressing the situation of disadvantaged and marginalized groups of women and girls... namely women migrant domestic workers, women human rights defenders and activists, women in detention, women with disabilities, women belonging to ethnic and religious minorities, and refugee, asylum-seeking and stateless women."

Ahead of the review, the Committee received submissions from local, regional and international civil society organisations, including a [joint submission](#) from ALQST and MENA Rights Group.

## Gender discrimination codified in law

The legal framework affecting the lives of women in Saudi Arabia is shaped by the 2022 Personal Status (or Family) Law, which, despite being touted by the authorities at the time as a major reform, in fact entrenches many pernicious features of the traditional male guardianship system. Meanwhile, women human rights defenders, women's rights activists, and even private individuals simply expressing support for women's rights continue to be targeted by the authorities for arrest and prosecution, severely undermining the authorities' narrative of women's empowerment.

Previously, in the absence of a codified family law, rulings on family issues were left entirely to the discretion of judges, who often discriminated harshly against women. The new law was eagerly awaited as a significant step forward, but in fact proved to affirm and codify many features of the male guardianship system. It also contains legal loopholes that have continued to allow discretionary interpretation, thus diminishing the impact of the positive changes it 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.

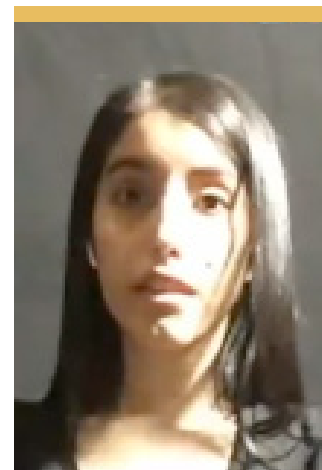
Under the Personal Status Law, women still need the consent of their male legal guardians to get married, and are expected to “obey” their husbands or, if not married, a male family member. Furthermore, the financial support a woman receives is contingent on her “submitting herself” to her husband. Women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

The ALQST [report](#) on its confidential survey of Saudi nationals in exile revealed that a high proportion (25%) of the participants cited domestic violence, and the failure of the Saudi system to provide protection, as factors that had driven them to seek safety abroad. In the absence of independent women’s refuges, the only institutions female victims of domestic abuse can turn to are Dar al-Re’aya (literally ‘care homes’ in Arabic). These are in fact detention facilities that house young women and girls who have become delinquent or have been accused as such by their male guardians because of “disobedience”. Women can be detained in these institutions for long periods, at the mercy of their male guardians without whose consent they cannot be released. Despite their name, these state-run institutions neither care for women nor provide them adequate shelter from domestic violence. On the contrary, in most cases they deprive women of their liberty, control them, and punish them for their “disobedience”.

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

## Ongoing targeting of women's rights supporters

The authorities meanwhile continue to target and punish women's rights activists, human rights defenders and even private individuals expressing support for women's rights, which severely undermines the official narrative of gender equality reforms. Over the past two years alone, the Saudi courts have convicted and passed long jail sentences on several women over peaceful rights activity on social media, including **Manahel al-Otaibi** (11 years' imprisonment), 19-year-old secondary school student **Manal al-Gafiri** (18 years), **Salma al-Shehab** (27 years, later reduced to four plus four suspended before her eventual release in February 2025), **Fatima al-Shawarb** (30 years), **Sukaynah al-Aithan** (40 years), and **Nourah al-Qahtani** (45 years).



*Manahel al-Otaibi  
taking part in a  
Deutsche Welle  
interview, 2019*

The cases of Manahel al-Otaibi and her sister **Fouz al-Otaibi** stand in particularly stark contrast to the authorities' talk of women's rights reform, with Manahel sentenced to 11 years in prison, and Fouz facing charges in absentia, for their choice of clothing and expression of feminist views online (for more see "Unfair Trials and Harsh Sentences", [page 26](#)). Manahel had even taken part in an [interview](#) in 2019 in which she said she felt free to wear what she liked and express her views on the basis of the Crown Prince's declarations. Yet she was arrested and sentenced for exercising exactly those freedoms.



*'They've destroyed us because of some tweets': why has Saudi Arabia targeted these three sisters? (The Guardian)*

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 was not extended to female citizens and residents, who face legal uncertainty: there have been numerous reports of other Saudi women being arrested since then under vague and broad accusations of wearing "indecent" clothing. A similar inconsistency can be seen with regard to lesbian, gay, bisexual



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

Meanwhile, prominent women human rights defenders including **Nassima al-Sadah**, **Samar Badawi** and **Loujain al-Hathloul**, who have long advocated for women's rights, continue to face heavy restrictions since being released from prison, notably arbitrary and unofficial travel bans that prevent them, and their families, from leaving the country (see "Conditional Releases and Travel Bans", [page 39](#)).

# Migrant Workers' Rights

A new law for domestic workers came into effect on 21 September 2024 offering several new protections for this vulnerable group, if implemented, but lacking enforcement mechanisms. Despite this and other limited reforms in recent years, Saudi Arabia's notorious kafala (sponsorship) system remains substantially intact, with migrant workers of all kinds continuing to suffer routine abuse. Given the prevalence of labour rights violations in the country, the prospect of Saudi Arabia preparing to host the 2034 World Cup raises serious risks of labour exploitation on a massive scale, including worker deaths.

## Migrant workers in Saudi Arabia

Migrant workers make up approximately 80% of the private labour force in Saudi Arabia, and more than a quarter of the country's population: 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 complexities in the Labour Law and private sector regulations.

## The kafala system

Saudi Arabia's 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 their visa and residence status and ability to travel. There have been some reforms to the labour laws in recent years, including the Labour Reform Initiative of 2021 that allows migrant workers, in certain narrow circumstances, to change jobs or leave the country without obtaining their employer's (or sponsor's) consent. But the impact of these reforms in practice remains unclear, with the authorities providing little information; the kafala system as a whole remains largely intact and continues to present clear risks of exploitation.

## The case of Ahmed Abdul Majeed: wage theft and extortion

The case of Indian national Ahmed Abdul Majeed highlights the way in which the kafala system facilitates rampant abuse. Arriving in Saudi Arabia in 1981, Majeed spent 40 years working as a sales manager for Saudi travel agency Al Tayyar (which in April 2019 rebranded as Seera Group, under the control of Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund). Yet at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, the company abruptly decided to terminate his contract. He informed his employer that he wished to return to India to tend to his ailing mother, but, still requiring their consent to exit the country, his request was declined and his passport confiscated. Instead, the company devised a scheme to force him to keep working to cover clients' overdue fees that were unrelated to his role. He did this, unpaid, from March until September 2020, when his work visa expired. At this point, the company forced Majeed to pay the clients' debts himself, which totalled \$100,000. He finally left the country, but the wage theft and extortion caused a huge financial burden, with severe repercussions for his family, let alone the emotional distress at the hands of a company he had dedicated four decades of his life towards. Now living in the United States with his son, he has yet to receive any reimbursement whatsoever, and repeated attempts to elicit a response from the company or the Saudi authorities have fallen on deaf ears.



*Ahmed Abdul Majeed in 1981, the year he arrived in Saudi Arabia, and in 2020*

## Risks to migrant workers as Saudi Arabia prepares for the World Cup

All workers in Saudi Arabia, and particularly the millions of low-paid workers recruited from some of the world's poorest countries, are vulnerable to abuse including contract substitution, exorbitant recruitment fees, non-payment of wages, confiscation of passports by employers, forced labour, and a weak, poorly enforced health and safety regime. Under such conditions, and given the ambitious infrastructure plans outlined in the Saudi World Cup bid needing rapid implementation, the risks of labour exploitation on a massive scale, including worker deaths, are clear. The migrant workers who underpin Saudi Arabia's construction industry and will be building or refurbishing 15 state-of-the-art stadiums and more than 130 team and referee hotels and training sites, with integrated transport and security facilities, typically endure poor working conditions, working long hours outdoors in the country's harsh climate and often suffering from heat stress and other health problems. Furthermore, when in the past workers in the kingdom have lost their lives, their deaths have not been properly investigated, and their grieving families have not been adequately compensated.

**Abdul Wali Skandar Khan**, a 25-year-old Pakistani civil engineer and father of two, died on 28 December 2023 [while working on a Neom construction site](#) after a barrier collapsed. He was employed by China Comservice under the umbrella of a subcontractor, Falcon Group. Despite the seriousness of the incident, neither the companies nor the Saudi authorities carried out a proper investigation or organised repatriation of his body. His brother Meer Wali Khan, a dual British-Pakistani citizen, had to travel to Saudi Arabia in January 2024 to retrieve Abdul Wali's body at his own expense. China Comservice's response was inadequate in other regards too, with promises of compensation and access to CCTV footage remaining unfulfilled, leaving Abdul Wali's family with neither clarity nor justice. Although the company ultimately deposited a small portion of the promised compensation in the Pakistani embassy's account, without the family's agreement, nearly a year later they are still fighting to access it. Meer Wali is currently seeking further support from NGOs



*Abdul Wali  
Skandar  
Khan*

and exploring legal avenues to secure accountability for his brother's death, and to alleviate the plight of other migrant workers.



Neom: Pakistani worker died while working on Saudi megacity  
(Middle East Eye)

## 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 (MHRSD) 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 came 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), a minimum age limit (21 years) and a right for domestic workers to terminate their contracts under certain circumstances. However, it fails to address other important issues, such as establishing a minimum wage. The real impact of the new law now rests on the degree of implementation and enforcement, which historically has been poor.

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

# Recommendations

## Recommendations for international stakeholders

### (i) Businesses

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

### (ii) Governments

- Suspend the supply of arms, other military equipment and surveillance technology at risk of being used to commit or facilitate serious rights violations;
- Write clear commitments to the rule of law and international human rights standards into the objectives of any trade, security or partnership deals negotiated with Saudi Arabia, and set clear and specific human rights benchmarks;
- Exert public and private pressure on the Saudi Arabian authorities to improve their human rights record (see below), including on thematic issues and, crucially, individual cases of concern.



- Request access to relevant trial hearings, and press the Saudi authorities on the issue of access to the country for international NGOs, parliamentarians, and UN fact-finding missions.
- Meet the growing challenges of transnational human rights violations by Saudi Arabia, including by providing protection and support for victims, limiting the ability of perpetrators to commit transnational repression and bring accountability for such acts;
- Support multilateral action at the United Nations, including following up on the recommendations made during Saudi Arabia's latest UPR review in January 2024, to ensure the Saudi authorities implement them, and actively support, or ideally endorse, proposals to establish a UN monitoring mechanism with a country mandate to report and advise on human rights in Saudi Arabia; 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.
- 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 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 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, which, during its fourth Universal Periodic Review (UPR), Saudi Arabia accepted a recommendation to do so;

- 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 2024

## 9 January:

Saudi Arabia's Specialised Criminal Court (SCC) sentences 29-year-old fitness instructor and women's rights activist Manahel al-Otaibi to 11 years in prison because of her choice of clothing and support for women's rights. The sentence is upheld in November

## 22 January:

During Saudi Arabia's fourth Universal Periodic Review (UPR), UN member states issue a long list of recommendations to address widespread and systematic rights violations in the kingdom

## 24 January:

Saudi police summon 150 supporters of Al Safa Football Club after a match, and arrest 12 of them, over peaceful chants that the authorities deem "sectarian". Some are jailed, but all are released later in the year

## January:

Human rights defender Waleed Abu al-Khair is subjected to beatings from another inmate in Dhahban Prison

## January:

Hatem al-Najjar, presenter of popular podcast Muraba (Square) on the Thmanyah channel, is arrested

## Unknown date in 2024:

The Specialised Criminal Court of Appeal resentsences political cartoonist Al Hazzaa – full name Mohammed Ahmad Eid Al Hazzaa al-Ghamdi – to 23 years in prison

**February:**

Woman human rights defender Loujain al-Hathloul attempts to leave the country to travel abroad, but is told at the border that she is under a permanent travel ban

**7 February:**

Saudi activist Abdulrahman al-Khalidi, who has been caught up in the asylum process in Bulgaria for more than two years, is notified of an order for his deportation

**March:**

ALQST learns that Malik al-Dowaish, whose father Sulaiman al-Dowaish has been forcibly disappeared since 2016, is to face a new trial

**March:**

The authorities refuse to transfer detained human rights defender Waleed Abu al-Khair to hospital, depriving him of essential medical care

**Late March:**

The authorities arrest Saleh al-Alwan, brother of detained cleric Suleiman al-Alwan, from his home in Buraydah

**4 April:**

The women's professional tennis tour (WTA) announces a three-year deal to hold its biggest event – the year-end WTA Finals – in Riyadh

**14 April:**

After months of enforced disappearance, detained fitness instructor Manahel al-Otaibi informs her family that she has a broken leg as a result of beatings

**April:**

The Specialised Criminal Court of Appeal upholds the death sentences against child defendants Youssef al-Manasef and Ali al-Mabiyouq

**April:**

Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development announces that it will revise the regulations on domestic workers who abscond, making it easier to transfer employment under certain conditions. It is unclear whether they have yet been implemented

**25 April:**

FIFA announces a three-year partnership with Saudi Arabia's state-owned oil company, Aramco, giving the company sponsorship rights for the men's World Cup in 2026 and women's World Cup in 2027

**10 May:**

Green energy company Solar Water withdraws from a Neom contract after learning about abuses linked to the project

**May:**

The SCC sentences two clerics detained since 2020, Khidr al-Awami and Abbas al-Saeed, to 25 and 27 years in prison for speeches they gave in support of human rights

**May:**

The SCC sentences cleric Amir al-Muhalhal to 30 years in prison for peacefully exercising his right to freedom of expression

**26 June:**

Saudi-American filmmaker and creator of hit series Masameer, Abdulaziz al-Muzaini, publishes an 18-minute video addressed to Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, in which he describes the repressive actions taken against him. It is deleted soon afterwards

**Mid-2024:**

Writer and academic Abdullah al-Maliki is released following the expiry of his seven-year sentence

**June:**

Journalist and writer Sultan al-Jumairi is released after spending almost six years in prison

**June:**

Journalist Ahmad al-Sawian is released after spending almost seven years in prison



**4 July:**

Saudi Arabia informs the UN Human Rights Council of its responses to its Universal Periodic Review (UPR). While accepting a high proportion (83%) of UN member states' recommendations, including some significant measures, it merely "notes" or formally rejects many others equally vital

**June:**

More than 1,300 people from over 20 countries die during the hajj pilgrimage amid extreme heat. The Saudi authorities' slow, limited and defensive response to the shocking death toll causes alarm

**19 July:**

Singer Rabee Hafez is released after spending almost seven years in prison

**30 July:**

32 Democrat Senators and Members of Congress write to US President Joe Biden and Secretary of State Antony Blinken urging them to press immediately for the unconditional release of prisoners of conscience in Saudi Arabia

**July:**

Asaad bin Nasser al-Ghamdi is sentenced to 20 years in prison on charges related to his peaceful social media activity

**1 August 2024:**

ALQST publishes a report based on the findings of its first-of-its-kind survey of Saudi nationals in exile. It paints an illuminating picture of the repression that has caused increasing numbers of Saudis to emigrate from their country over the past decade

**August:**

The Specialised Criminal Court of Appeal quashes the death sentence against 55-year-old retired teacher Mohammad bin Nasser al-Ghamdi. Weeks later he is resentenced to 30 years in prison on charges related to his peaceful social media activity

**9 August:**

The US confirms it will resume the sales of "offensive weapons" to Saudi Arabia, suspended for years over the kingdom's role in the Yemen conflict

• **17 August:**

59-year-old Shi'a Abdulmajeed Al Nimr is executed, according to the Ministry of Interior, on the implausible grounds that he had joined a terrorist cell affiliated to Al-Qaeda – a charge that did not appear anywhere in the court documents relating to his trial and sentencing

• **September:**

Manahel al-Otaibi is exposed to further harrowing abuse in jail, this time being stabbed in the face by an unknown woman

• **21 September:**

A British sports journalist is barred from attending a Saudi-organised heavyweight boxing fight in London after publishing a critical article about it

• **25 September:**

Salma al-Shehab and Nourah al-Qahtani, serving 27- and 45-year prison terms respectively, are unexpectedly brought for retrial

• **October:**

More than 100 professional female footballers sign a letter calling on FIFA to end its sponsorship deal with the state-owned Saudi Arabian oil company Aramco

• **October 2024:**

The High Court in London gives ALQST founder Yahya Assiri the go-ahead to serve a legal claim against Saudi Arabia over cyberattacks on him using Pegasus and QuaDream spyware

• **7-25 October:**

Saudi Arabia's record on women's rights is reviewed by the UN Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and Girls (CEDAW). The Committee expresses a wide range of serious concerns

• **9 October:**

Saudi Arabia is defeated in its bid for election to the UN Human Rights Council, in a significant victory for human rights

• **16 October:**

Mohammed bin Salman visits Brussels to attend the EU-Gulf Cooperation Summit

● **25 October:**

The Administrative Court in Sofia issues a non-appealable decision to extradite Abdulrahman al-Khalidi to Saudi Arabia, where he faces the risk of grave violations of his rights

● **Late October:**

Journalist Jamil Farsi is released after spending over seven years in prison

● **Early November:**

After more than two years of enforced disappearance, detained human rights defender Mohammed al-Qahtani is finally able to contact his family, and resumes weekly calls

● **13 November:**

Egyptian national Ahmed Fathi Kamal Kamel is arrested in Saudi Arabia following an extradition request by Egypt, where he would be at high risk of grave rights violations

● **19 November:**

ALQST publishes a briefing paper on the wide range of concerns regarding the vast Neom gigaproject

● **27-28 November:**

Saudi Arabia is reviewed by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD)

● **9 December:**

UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer meets Saudi Arabia's crown prince in Riyadh, on a trip dominated by the issues of trade and investment

● **11 December:**

Saudi Arabia, as the sole bidder, is confirmed as host of the 2034 FIFA men's World Cup

● **15-19 December:**

The 2024 Internet Governance Forum takes place in Riyadh. Concerns over Saudi Arabia's suitability to host the UN-sponsored event prove to have been well-founded, as the proceedings are tainted by online hacks and censorship

• **17 December:**

The EU and Saudi Arabia hold their fourth Human Rights Dialogue in Riyadh. The EU expresses concerns about the rise in executions and restrictive environment for civil and political rights

• **December:**

Malik al-Ahmad, Mohammed al-Khudairi and Mohammed al-Habdan, all arrested in the September 2017 crackdown on free speech, are released

• **December:**

Blogger Dawood al-Ali is released under conditions that remain unclear

