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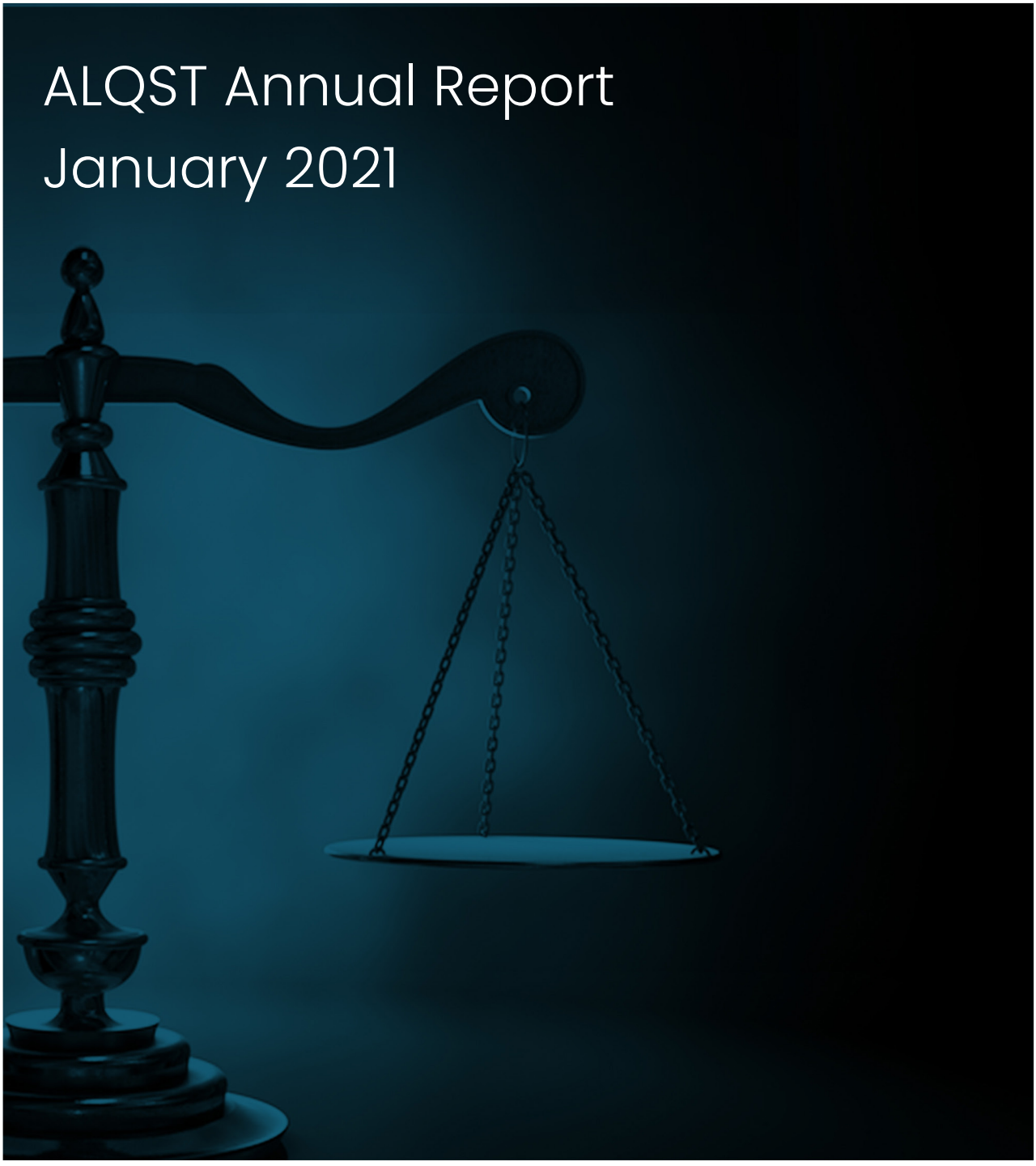
لدعم حقوق الانسان
Advocating for Human Rights

Abuses Under Scrutiny:

Human Rights in Saudi Arabia



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ISBN: 978-1-913205-08-9
ISBN ebook: 978-1-913205-09-6

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1 Executive Summary

In 2020 Saudi Arabia – headed by the elderly King Salman but effectively run by his powerful son, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (commonly known as "MBS") – continued to commit extensive human rights violations. Yet international criticism of its dismal record intensified, and by the end of the year the prospect of a change in US administration was already adding to the pressure for progress in 2021.

The Saudi authorities were already facing unprecedented global outrage over the brazen murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi and the ongoing suppression of free speech, human rights activism and the rights of women in the kingdom. But in 2020, the year in which Saudi Arabia held the G20 presidency and hoped to use it to revamp its international reputation, campaigns by international NGOs and diaspora activists galvanised growing segments of the world community into making clear that the kingdom's abuses would no longer be accepted without question.

The global COVID-19 pandemic also had an impact on the human rights situation in Saudi Arabia, highlighting the serious health risks to inmates of the kingdom's overcrowded and insanitary prisons as well as causing a five-month suspension of the court system, which left many locked up in abysmal conditions without their trials being heard.

Throughout the year the Saudi authorities continued to make arbitrary arrests of people exercising their right to free speech and other fundamental rights, while also targeting government officials and members of the ruling Al Saud family. Given the difficulty of obtaining information on the ground, it is not possible to know the full extent of such arrests, which means that those described in this report, along with other violations, are likely to represent only a fraction of the total.

Abuses of those behind bars, including petty harassment, denial of medical treatment and the denial of family contact, followed an alarming pattern in 2020. This was demonstrated most starkly in April 2020 by the death in detention of human rights defender Abdullah al-Hamid as a result of repeated ill-treatment and denial of medical treatment by the Saudi authorities.

> Still trying to present the image of a country striving for reform, the Saudi authorities continued to pursue an intensive global PR offensive and invest heavily in sports and entertainment, but 2020 saw large parts of the international community not buying into the Saudi narrative.

Judicial proceedings continued to be marred by numerous violations of international fair trial guarantees. Following the reopening of the courts in August 2020 as the COVID-19 crisis eased, many prisoners of conscience and detainees were brought to court in unfair trial proceedings. Several were sentenced to prison in relation to their human rights activism and free speech, including women human rights defenders Loujain al-Hathloul and Mayaa al-Zahrani, writer Abdullah al-Maliki and doctor Walid Fitaihi. Meanwhile, the courts "concluded" their sham trial for the murder of Jamal Khashoggi by sentencing to prison eight defendants, some of them still not identified, the final parody of justice in a trial that lacked all transparency.

The practice of forced displacement was another worrying trend throughout the year. Thousands of members of the Huwaitat tribe in Tabuk Province, bordering the Red Sea, were forcibly evicted to make way for the Neom megacity project, part of MBS's Vision 2030 economic development programme. Their displacement was effected by means of coercive pressure, arbitrary arrests and violence, including the fatal shooting of Abdul Rahim al-Huwaiti.

In 2020 the war in Yemen entered its sixth year, and despite the announcement of a temporary ceasefire fighting continued on many sides, including continued air strikes by the Saudi-led coalition, leading to further civilian deaths.

Amid international criticism of their dismal human rights record, the Saudi authorities have tried to improve their image by announcing some reforms in recent years, but these have generally fallen far short of the changes needed. In 2020, the authorities purportedly issued a decree ending judges' discretion to apply the death penalty to minors, yet it contained various loopholes leaving several ways in which minors can still be executed.

For many years Saudi Arabia has been among the world's leading practitioners of the death penalty, and while 2020 saw a sharp fall in the number of executions carried out in the kingdom, it is not clear whether this will prove to be a one-off reduction or the start of a new trend. While Saudi Arabia's

official Human Rights Commission announced that this reduction was linked to a moratorium on death penalties for drug-related offences, there has not been any published change in the law and there is no evidence to suggest that the lower figure for 2020 was not merely a side-effect of the COVID-19 pandemic or a temporary response to being in the international spotlight during the kingdom's G20 presidency.

In October 2020, the authorities announced reforms to the notorious kafala (sponsorship) system, under which foreigners employed in Saudi Arabia are tied to an individual resident who acts as his or her sponsor. Again, however, the new measures contained several loopholes, including not protecting millions of domestic workers. Similarly, although some restrictions on women have been lifted in recent years, the oppressive male guardianship system has by no means been dismantled and continued to hamper the lives of women in Saudi Arabia in 2020.

Still trying to present the image of a country striving for reform, the Saudi authorities continued to pursue an intensive global PR offensive and invest heavily in sports and entertainment, but 2020 saw large parts of the international community not buying into the Saudi narrative. Riyadh saw its hosting of the G20 summit in November 2020 as another PR opportunity to whitewash the kingdom's image. Instead, however, as NGOs, policymakers and activists in the diaspora mobilised, significant international pressure was brought to bear on the Saudi authorities in the months leading up to the summit, which was in the end held virtually because of the pandemic. As awareness of the Saudi authorities' violations increased, several European and American mayors pulled out of a G20 city leaders' forum; the European Parliament voted to downgrade G20 attendance; and in October 2020 Saudi Arabia lost its bid for re-election to a further term on the UN Human Rights Council.

It is likely that some of the authorities' announcements on proposed reforms, and the recent, apparently politically influenced, softening of sentences passed on prominent activists, have come about in response to such pressure, especially since the election of the Democratic candidate Joe Biden as the next president of the United States, with the incoming US administration likely to take a more critical stance toward Riyadh. It is therefore incumbent on the international community to maintain and intensify the pressure on the Saudi authorities to end their grave human rights violations and undertake genuine human rights reforms, in the hope that 2021 will bring positive progress.

2 Legal Framework

The absence of fundamental laws creates a legal vacuum

The Saudi authorities claim that jurisdiction 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 solidify 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 absence of a criminal code undermines clarity and legal certainty and violates Article 11 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states that "[n]o one shall be held guilty of any act or omission which did not constitute a penal offence, under national or international law, at the time when it was committed". Meanwhile, the legal vacuum in Saudi Arabia is being filled with pieces of exceptional legislation, such as those discussed below, which can be interpreted to include a wide spectrum of offences.

The Law on Combating Crimes of Terrorism and its Financing

On 1 November 2017 the Law on Combating Crimes of Terrorism and its Financing (the Counter-Terrorism Law) came into force, replacing the already repressive 2014 Counter-Terrorism Law. The new law defines terrorism in vague terms and does not require the use of violence in order to

characterise an act 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".

The law also punishes anyone who "directly or indirectly" describes the King or the Crown Prince as "in any way harming religion or justice" with five to 10 years in prison. This law is used to criminalise acts that fall under the rights to freedom of opinion, expression, peaceful assembly and association.

Moreover, the new Counter-Terrorism Law fails to uphold due process guarantees. Articles 19 and 20 of the law grant 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 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 to torture.

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 Saudi authorities have pledged to uphold the standards of international 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 Law on Associations and Foundations

Approved in December 2015, the Law on Associations and Foundations officially came into force in March 2016. Before that date no legislation had existed to permit or regulate the establishment of civil society organisations, although the Saudi authorities had historically allowed the operation of charitable associations under tight government control.

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

On top of its national legal framework, Saudi Arabia has further committed to a number of international human rights instruments. 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); 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.

3 Arbitrary Arrests

In recent years the Saudi authorities have arbitrarily arrested any and all critical voices, as part of a wider and unrelenting crackdown on free speech and dissent. Such arrests have often occurred in waves: the mass arrest of religious figures, academics and writers in September 2017; a wave of arrests targeting women human rights defenders between May and July 2018; and the arrests in April 2019 of bloggers and writers who had engaged in public discourse on reform. The majority of those arrested remain in prison to this day as prisoners of conscience, facing prolonged detention without charge or serving prison sentences following unfair trials.

Despite the majority of human rights activists, advocates of reform and independent public figures being already in detention, the Saudi authorities continued in 2020 to carry out further arbitrary arrests against those exercising their right to free expression and other fundamental rights. New details also emerged of arrests carried out in 2019. Meanwhile, new classes of victim have also been targeted for arbitrary arrest in recent years, including government officials, businessmen and members of the ruling family, a trend which continued in 2020.

Arrests over freedom of expression

Aql al-Bahili

Abdulaziz al-Dukhail

Abdullah Ibrahim Al Sayel

The Saudi authorities continued to carry out arbitrary arrests against those exercising their right of free expression in 2020. In late April 2020, the authorities carried out a spate of arrests of journalists and intellectuals for expressing sympathy over the death in detention of human rights defender Abdullah al-Hamid, who died as a result of deliberate medical neglect by the Saudi authorities (for more details see under "detainees at risk", page 18). Those arrested included journalist **Aql al-Bahili**, writer **Abdulaziz al-Dukhail**, and activist **Sultan al-Ajmi**. Al-Bahili was arrested just two days after posting a tweet of condolence, which he later deleted, and was taken to al-Ha'ir Prison in Riyadh, where he continues to be held without charge and without being granted access to a lawyer. ALQST does not have any further information about al-Dukhail and al-Ajmi's status or whereabouts, or about others arrested at the same time. However, later in the year ALQST received news that another writer, **Ali al-Shadwi,** was also among those arrested after posting a tweet of condolence. These arrests highlight the Saudi authorities' brazen disregard for the right to freedom of expression, showing that even expressing sympathy for a deceased prisoner of conscience can lead to arrest.

Sometimes it takes weeks or even months for news of an arrest to surface, as victims are often subjected to periods of enforced disappearance, and because of the climate of fear that prevails in the country. In January 2020, ALQST published details about the arrest of **Maha al-Rafidi**, a trainee journalist at daily newspaper al-Watan. Al-Radifi was arrested on 28 September 2019 during a night-time raid by approximately thirty Saudi officials, including armed and hooded men and others in military uniform, on the home of a family member where al-Rafidi was staying. Following her arrest she was taken to Sha'ar Prison, where she has been held without charge since, including for months in solitary confinement. Her arrest appears to be linked to her activity on Twitter, where she tweeted in support of human rights, including for the release of prisoners of conscience. Likewise, ALQST received belated news that **Abdullah Ibrahim Al Sayel**, a student at King Khalid University, had been arrested by Saudi officials in September 2019, following a raid on his home in Muhayil, over his activity on Twitter and support for prisoners of conscience.

The authorities' manipulation of social media platform Twitter

Saudi Arabia is the country with the highest number of active internet users in the MENA region. According to figures from Global Media Insight, nearly 90% of the population actively uses the internet, and 67% are active on social media platforms. Twitter was once perceived by many Saudi citizens as a space in which they could voice and exchange opinions that they never dared to express in real life. Yet over the years it has become clear that the Saudi authorities will not tolerate freedom of expression on social media platforms, and many activists have in fact been prosecuted under the Anti-Cybercrime Law for posting critical tweets. As a consequence, more and more Saudis either censor themselves or tweet anonymously using aliases.

The Saudi authorities have also attempted to weaponise Twitter as a tool of both surveillance and propaganda. On 6 November 2019 two former Twitter employees were charged in the United States with spying for Saudi Arabia by accessing the company's information on dissidents who use the platform. The indictment detailed a coordinated effort by Saudi officials to recruit employees at Twitter to look up the private data of thousands of Twitter accounts. Then in December 2019, Twitter announced that it had suspended thousands of accounts linked to a manipulation effort stemming from Saudi Arabia, as part of a crackdown on state-sponsored propaganda efforts. The social network said it was blocking some 88,000 accounts linked to Saudi state-backed "information operations" in violation of Twitter's platform manipulation rules.

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Hezam al-Ahmari

The boundaries of what constitutes criticism of the authorities are not always clear, changing according to the whims of those in power. **Hezam al-Ahmari**, an employee at Jeddah seaport, was arrested on 10 February 2020 following a raid on his home in the city by officials from Saudi Arabia's Mabaheth secret police. He was arrested for filming a video near his home, shared on the video-sharing app TikTok, in which he criticised the presence of a nightclub in his neighbourhood in close proximity to a mosque, and referred to Mohammed bin Salman's "Vision 2030" economic development programme. Al-Ahmari has since been charged with offences including "inciting public opinion" under Article 6 of the Anti-Cybercrime Law, and faces trial before the Specialised Criminal Court. Since his arrest, al-Ahmari has been denied any contact with or visits from his family, and denied access to legal counsel. The authorities have stated that he is being held in Dhahban Central Prison in Jeddah, but since this cannot be confirmed he technically remains forcibly disappeared.

In a similar vein, following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, the Saudi authorities arrested a number of well-known social media personalities who commented on the spread of the virus, as well as other public figures, later releasing them. These arrests occurred mostly at the instigation of persons close to the authorities.

The Mabaheth

Arbitrary arrests in Saudi Arabia are often carried out by the country's secret police (the Mabaheth). Previously under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Interior, in 2017 the Mabaheth became an agency of the newly created Presidency of State Security, a security apparatus overseen directly by the king.

Often the reason for an arrest is unclear. On 6 December 2020, cleric **Hashim al-Shakhs** was arrested in a raid on his home in al-Ahsa, after his neighbourhood was cordoned off by security forces. His arrest followed that of religious figures **Khadr al-Awami**, **Abbas al-Saeed** and **Wasim al-Nimr** in Qatif in November 2020, and preceded a further arrest in mid-December of a woman, also from al-Ahsa. The reasons for these arrests remain unknown.

Arrests of ruling family members and government officials

Since King Salman bin Abdulaziz came to the throne on 23 January 2015, and particularly since his son Mohammed bin Salman became crown prince on 21 June 2017, not only has the crackdown on peaceful dissidents intensified, but new classes of victim have also been targeted, including government officials, businessmen and members of the ruling Al Saud family. While the authorities often carry out such arrests under the banner of "combating corruption", the total lack of transparency surrounding them, often with no charges brought, means that the real reasons are unclear and may relate to perceived criticism of the authorities, or even personal rivalry with Mohammed bin Salman. Those caught up in the crackdown have been subjected to numerous violations.

In April 2020, details of the detention of **Basma bint Saud Al Saud**, a daughter of the former King Saud, were published on her verified Twitter account. She had been taken from her home in Jeddah to Riyadh on 1 March 2019, having been informed that Mohammed bin Salman wished to meet with her. However, she was instead taken straight to al-Ha'ir Prison, together with her daughter **Suhoud**, without meeting the crown prince. After her arrest Basma was subjected to enforced disappearance; she remains disappeared at the time of writing of this report, and there are fears for her health and well-being (for more details see under "detainees at risk", page 24). The reason for her arrest is unknown, and at no point during her detention has any charge been brought against her.

Basma bint Saud Al Saud

ALQST also received information about the arrests of ruling family member **Salman bin Abdulaziz bin Salman bin Mohammed Al Saud** and his father **Abdulaziz Al Saud**. Salman Al Saud was arrested on 4 January 2018 after a meeting to which he and his father had been invited by the Emirate of Riyadh Province, attended by dozens of male members of the Al Saud ruling family as well as the crown prince's adviser at the time, Saud al-Qahtani, together with a number of masked men and soldiers.

Salman bin Abdulaziz

Salman bin Abdulaziz was beaten and tortured in front of the rest of the attendees by this force accompanying Saud al-Qahtani. Some of those present were accused of taking part in meetings and making pacts with the aim of deposing Mohammed bin Salman as crown prince, and sharing these ideas with people abroad in the hope that they would help them. Shots were fired inside the palace, but it is not known whether they were fired at anyone or simply warning shots; then Salman and 10 of the other attendees were arrested.

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Abdulaziz bin Salman Al Saud

The following day, on 5 January 2018, Salman's father **Abdulaziz bin Salman Al Saud** phoned some people in Europe, including a French lawyer living in Paris, seeking their help to secure his son's release. That same day, Abdulaziz's home in the al-Nakheel district of Riyadh was raided by a large squad of heavily armed men. They destroyed the house's CCTV cameras before arresting him and seizing a number of devices from his house, accusing him of being in communication with foreign entities, and then taking him away to put him in detention. Since their arrest, the two men have been detained for periods in al-Ha'ir Prison and in a private villa, and have also been subjected to periods of enforced disappearance. Both remain disappeared at the time of writing of this report, without any charges having been brought against them (for more details see under "detainees at risk", page 24).

In August 2020, ALQST and MENA Rights Group submitted a complaint on behalf of Salman and his father Abdulaziz to the Special Procedures of the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, asking for the Saudi authorities to cease their violations against the two men.

As well as these arrests coming to light in 2020, there were also unconfirmed reports of other arrests of ruling family members during the year. In March 2020 there were reports of a wave of arrests of several royal family figures, including former Crown Prince **Mohammed bin Nayef** and **Ahmed bin Abdulaziz Al Saud**, a brother of King Salman, who reportedly continue to be held without charge at an unknown location. And in November 2020, ALQST received unconfirmed reports about the arrest of Minister of National Guard **Abdullah bin Bandar**, a cousin and long-time friend of MBS.

On 15 March 2020 the national news agency reported the arrests of 298 government officials, and in September a royal decree announced that a number of officers and employees from the Ministry of Interior were being referred for investigation. Then in November Saudi Arabia's Oversight and Anti-Corruption Authority announced that it had made 226 arrests over alleged corruption charges, including of employees in the Ministry of Defence and other ministries. However, this purported basis for the arrests is dubious, given that corruption remains endemic at the highest levels, and that rivalry and infighting within the royal family seems a more plausible motivation. These arrests therefore raise human rights concerns, especially in light of the authorities' previous "anti-corruption" crackdown in November 2017.

November 2017 arrests

In November 2017 a large number of prominent Saudi business people, government ministers and members of the royal family were arrested and detained in the Ritz-Carlton hotel in Riyadh. Officially billed an "anti-corruption drive", the dramatic arrests alarmed the international community and business world. Some of the detainees, including at least one US citizen, were ill-treated and tortured, leading to subsequent hospitalisation, and one, Major-General Ali al-Qahtani, later died in custody. The detainees, many subjected to coercion, were able to "buy" their freedom by transferring assets to the state, with settlements, according to the authorities, reaching over $100 billion.

Prior to the 2017 Ritz-Carlton arrests, a newly created "anti-corruption" agency was given extensive powers to investigate and prosecute corruption. Its investigations were conducted secretly and raised major concerns over due process. Many critics believe the creation of this agency and the crackdowns that followed were aimed primarily at collecting money for the Public Investment Fund, chaired by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, and further consolidating MBS's power by removing major opponents. The crackdown clearly illustrated that the kingdom's rulers had no qualms about using extortion, arbitrary detention, coercion and torture to stifle competition and assert their own authority.

4 Detainees at Risk

Following sustained crackdowns in recent years on activists, reformers and critical voices, Saudi prisons hold many prisoners of conscience, as well as other detainees held arbitrarily. Prisoners of conscience continued in 2020 to face cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment behind bars, including denial of medical treatment and the denial of contact with the outside world. An extreme example of this pattern of punitive behaviour was the death of the iconic human rights defender Abdullah al-Hamid, who died in April 2020 as a result of repeated ill-treatment and denial of medical treatment by the Saudi authorities. Another detainee, journalist Saleh al-Shehi, died in July 2020 in mysterious circumstances, just two months after his unexpected release from prison.

The vulnerability of detainees in Saudi prisons was highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic that swept the world in 2020. The overcrowding and insanitary conditions in Saudi Arabia's prisons exposed the health and safety of inmates to serious risks, yet the authorities failed to take clear measures in mitigation, such as releasing the most vulnerable prisoners and those posing no danger to the public, such as prisoners of conscience, many of whom were instead denied contact with family and friends for lengthy periods.

Death of Abdullah al-Hamid as a result of denial of medical treatment

Abdullah al-Hamid

An extreme example of the Saudi authorities' cruel and dangerous treatment of detainees was the death of iconic human rights defender **Abdullah al-Hamid**, who died on 23 April 2020 at the King Saud Medical City Hospital after suffering a cerebral stroke on 9 April. He was 69 years old and had been in a critical state of health in prison for many months, suffering from cardiovascular disease, for which he was transferred to hospital at the start of 2020. Doctors told him at the time thwat he urgently needed a heart catheterisation operation, but the authorities ignored this medical opinion and sent him back to prison, telling him he would have the operation during Ramadan (late May-early June).

Despite his deteriorating health, advanced age and the rapid spread of COVID-19, the Saudi authorities refused to release al-Hamid on safety and humanitarian grounds. Instead, they put him under heavy psychological pressure by denying him phone calls and visits on a number of occasions, and pressuring him not to inform his family or anyone else outside about his worsening state of health. This went on for several months until, on 9 April 2020, he lost consciousness and was transferred to King Saud Medical City Hospital, where he was diagnosed with a severe cerebral stroke that had put him in a coma. He was kept in the hospital's intensive care unit and died there in the evening of 23 April 2020.

Abdullah al-Hamid (1950-2020)

Abdullah al-Hamid was an academic and writer whose activism went back more than 20 years. In 1993 he co-founded a political advocacy group called the Committee for the Defence of Legitimate Rights, and in October 2009 he established, along with a group of other prominent Saudi human rights defenders, the Saudi Association for Civil and Political Rights (ACPRA), which worked to denounce rights violations within the kingdom and helped victims to file legal claims against the officials responsible.

> Abdullah al-Hamid's death is part of a pattern of harassment to which the majority of Saudi prisoners of conscience are subjected, with the authorities deliberately making life difficult for them and denying them their basic rights, including access to medical treatment, even behind bars.

Al-Hamid and his ACPRA colleagues, including his brothers Issa and Abdulrahman, contributed greatly to a domestic grassroots approach to human rights that offers a local solution to the realisation of universal human rights in Saudi Arabia.

Abdullah al-Hamid himself was imprisoned five times between 1993 and 2008, during which time he was severely tortured, resulting in a loss of hearing in one ear from repeated beatings during interrogation. In March 2013 he was sentenced by the Specialised Criminal Court in Riyadh to 11 years in prison to be followed by a five-year travel ban, on charges including "promoting [peaceful] protests", "incitement against the ruler, the king and senior scholars", and "causing public disorder and unrest". His pioneering work has seen him win international awards, including the Right Livelihood Award – known as "the alternative Nobel Prize" – in 2018, jointly with his colleague Mohammed al-Qahtani and activist Waleed Abu al-Khair, and in 2020 the Netherlands' top human rights prize, the Geuzenpenning award, together with his ACPRA colleagues. His legacy in the field of reform and human rights will live on in Saudi Arabia and beyond.

ALQST holds the Saudi authorities directly responsible for Abdullah al-Hamid's death, and condemns their reckless behaviour with regard to his health, safety and life, including deliberately denying him the urgent medical treatment he needed, and repeatedly subjecting him to torture and ill-treatment in prison. His death was widely condemned internationally, and on 2 June 2020 UN experts sent a letter to Saudi Arabia expressing deep concern over his death and asking the Saudi authorities to explain the delay in the life-saving heart surgery al-Hamid's doctors said he needed.

Al-Hamid's death is part of a pattern of harassment to which the majority of Saudi prisoners of conscience are subjected, with the authorities deliberately making life difficult for them and denying them their basic rights, including access to medical treatment, even behind bars. Many other detainees remain at risk. In August 2020, ALQST received news that the health of leading Palestinian official **Mohammed Saleh al-Khudari**, detained arbitrarily since April 2019 and suffering from a herniated disc, had deteriorated in prison. In recent months the health of cleric **Salman al-Odah** has sharply declined, including the loss of almost half of his ability to hear and see. Al-Odah has experienced severe mistreatment in prison since his arbitrary arrest in September 2017, including being denied medication for high blood pressure and high cholesterol.

Death of Saleh al-Shehi in mysterious circumstances

Saleh al-Shehi

Another detainee, journalist **Saleh al-Shehi**, died on 19 July 2020, just two months after being unexpectedly released from prison. Al-Shehi, a well-known newspaper columnist, was arrested in January 2018 and put on trial with unusual speed before the Specialised Criminal Court, where he was charged, convicted and sentenced, in a single session on 8 February 2018, to five years in prison. He was charged with "insulting the royal court" after criticising Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's so-called anti-corruption drive.

On 19 May 2020, after serving two and a half years of his five-year sentence, al-Shehi was unexpectedly released. The terms of his release were not made known, including whether it was to be permanent or temporary. In June 2020 al-Shehi was transferred to intensive care in hospital, and he died on 19 July. The Saudi authorities have said that he died from COVID-19; however the circumstances of his death, like the circumstances of his release, remain highly ambiguous. ALQST calls for an impartial, prompt, thorough, independent and effective investigation into Saleh al-Shehi's death, led by international experts.

COVID-19 and denial of contact

ALQST has often reported on the overcrowded and insanitary conditions in Saudi Arabia's prisons, where torture and ill-treatment, drugs and crime are rife. As the COVID-19 pandemic swept the world in early 2020, and the highly infectious novel coronavirus spread throughout Saudi Arabia, ALQST highlighted the extreme risks posed by overcrowding to the health of prisoners, staff and visitors alike. It urged the Saudi authorities to take measures to combat the virus' spread, such as providing health screenings, and to minimise the risks posed by overcrowding by releasing prisoners who posed no danger to the public, specifically prisoners of conscience, as well as the most vulnerable.

While the authorities introduced measures to curb the spread of COVID-19 in the country at large, including halting international and domestic travel and expanding medical care, they failed to take adequate measures to mitigate the risks for those in prisons and detention centres. In March 2020, Saudi Arabia's official Human Rights Commission announced the release of 250 immigration detainees, yet nothing was done to address the risk to the thousands of migrants who remain in detention in deplorable conditions. In March 2020 the authorities banned in-person visits for prisoners across the country as a precautionary measure, yet they failed to give them adequate access to alternative means of communication with the outside world, and instead routinely denied detainees regular contact with family and friends.

In a move that cannot be explained on medical or health grounds, a large number of prisoners of

conscience were denied all contact with the outside world, in particular with family or legal counsel, for extended periods following the COVID-19 outbreak. One of these was women human rights defender **Loujain al-Hathloul**, who was denied any phone calls or visits from 19 April to 31 August 2020, and again from 9 September to 26 October. Likewise, religious reformer **Salman al-Odah** was denied any outside contact for several months. Such cases of prolonged denial of contact are considered enforced disappearances under international human rights law, and raise serious concerns for the victim's fate and wellbeing.

> While the authorities introduced measures to curb the spread of COVID-19 in the country at large, including halting international and domestic travel and expanding medical care, they failed to take adequate measures to mitigate the risks for those in prisons and detention centres.

Salman al-Odah

Loujain al-Hathloul

Essa al-Hamid

Mohammed al-Qahtani

A number of other prisoners of conscience have been subjected to this practice. In February 2020 human rights defender **Mohammed al-Qahtani**, a co-founder of the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association (ACPRA) serving a 10-year sentence in al-Ha'ir prison near Riyadh on charges relating to his peaceful human rights work, was denied contact with his family for several days after he was transferred from one prison building to another. In April 2020 human rights defender **Essa al-Hamid** was placed in solitary confinement for approximately 10 days, including a period during which his brother Abdullah al-Hamid was in hospital. And in September 2020 ALQST learned that the Saudi authorities were preventing human rights activist **Abdulaziz al-Sunaidi** – detained since 2015 and jailed for eight years for tweeting about human rights – from receiving visits or phone calls, repeatedly placing him in isolation, and threatening and psychologically torturing him.

Enforced disappearance

The practice of enforced disappearance is systematic and widespread in Saudi Arabia. It is used by the authorities to silence activists, journalists and other critics. It is also part of a larger pattern of arbitrary arrests that are followed by shorter or longer periods of enforced disappearance before victims reappear to face trial. This means that most people who get arrested in Saudi Arabia endure periods of enforced disappearance. Exactly how long this situation lasts depends on whether or not the family and relatives enquire after the victim and demand to know their fate, and also how well known the victim's name is in the media or among NGOs and UN bodies.

> He was questioned by a high-ranking official about his tweet and severely beaten until he was drenched in blood and others had to intervene for fear he would be killed. He was tortured on several further occasions.

Sometimes enforced disappearances continue for a very long time, raising concerns for the safety and fate of the victims. Examples include journalist **Marwan al-Muraisy**, who was arrested by security forces in June 2018 and was only able to contact his family for the first time in May 2019, after almost a year of enforced disappearance. He remains in detention, and was still facing trial as of October 2020. On 5 June 2020 his sister passed away without Marwan being able to see or phone her during her last illness.

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. Following 23 months of enforced disappearance and no news about his fate, on 12 February 2020 he was for the first time allowed to make a phone call to his family. During the call, al-Sadhan mentioned being held at al-Ha'ir Prison, but the Saudi authorities have to date failed to confirm this. Since then, he has been denied any further contact with his family and therefore remains technically subject to enforced disappearance, raising serious concerns for his health and well-being.

Similarly, journalist **Turki al-Jasser** was arrested on 15 March 2018 following a raid on his home, and completely disappeared. For nearly two years he was not allowed any visits or phone calls, and the Saudi authorities refused to answer any inquiries about him. Finally, in February 2020, in response to a submission from the Special Procedures of the UN Human Rights Council, the Saudi authorities said he was being held in al-Ha'ir prison. At the same time, he was allowed for the first time to make a phone call to his family, in which he informed them of his location. However, since then he has been denied any further contact and remains subject to enforced disappearance.

Preacher **Sulaiman al-Dowaish** was arrested at a hotel in Mecca on 22 April 2016, the morning after posting tweets critical of King Salman and Mohammed bin Salman, then Deputy Crown Prince. In shocking information that ALQST obtained in 2020, it was revealed that following al-Dowaish's arrest by a group of men from the Diwan (royal court) he was taken to a Ministry of Defense facility in Jeddah, flown to Riyadh by night, and taken to a royal palace. There he was questioned by a high-ranking official about his tweet and severely beaten until he was drenched in blood and others had to intervene for fear he would be killed. He was tortured on several further occasions.

Around two months after al-Dowaish's arrest, his name was added to the Ministry of Interior's online database of detainees. However, when his family called a senior official to inquire about him, they were told that this was a mistake, and they should search for him at hospitals, morgues, or mental asylums. Early in 2018, his family received a phone call from a US number in which the caller, who sounded like al-Dowaish, told them he was in Turkey on his way to fight in Syria. When his family contacted the authorities again and challenged this story, they received conflicting information. Whereas a low-ranking Ministry of Interior official said al-Dowaish had been convicted on charges including "inciting public opinion", this was denied by a higher-ranking official. His family received another call from the United States in September 2018, repeating a similar story. The last reported sighting of al-Dowaish was in July 2018. Nothing has been heard of him or his health or whereabouts since then; he remains forcibly disappeared.

The prison where al-Dowaish was interrogated and tortured is located in the basement of a royal palace, and is made up of makeshift wooden cells containing torture equipment. It is thought to be reserved for rival members of the royal family and high-ranking officials, and may have held as many as 150 prisoners. It appears to be run personally by two officials: Saud al-Qahtani, an adviser to MBS, and Maher al-Mutrib, a royal bodyguard and member of the hit squad sent to Istanbul to murder Jamal Khashoggi.

Torture and coerced confessions

Torture has been practised systematically in Saudi Arabia, both to extract confessions during interrogations and as a form of punishment during detention. Methods of torture and ill-treatment have included beating, flogging, electric shocks, sleep deprivation, incommunicado and prolonged solitary detention, and threats of raping or killing victims' relatives. Although defendants have often alleged in court that they underwent torture in detention, investigations are virtually never conducted into such allegations, and coerced confessions are routinely admitted as evidence against the accused.

Although ALQST has not documented any fresh reports of physical torture during 2020, the widespread practice of enforced disappearance and incommunicado detention, against this background of systematic torture in a climate of impunity, it is considered likely that further instances of torture have been occurred. Meanwhile, Saudi courts continued in 2020 to dismiss recent torture allegations, as in the case of women human rights defender Loujain al-Hathloul.

While Saudi Arabia has been a party to the UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment since 1997, Saudi law is not aligned with international standards and does not offer sufficient legal safeguards to protect individuals from torture. The law does not contain provisions to ensure the absolute and non-derogable prohibition of torture, nor does it define torture as prescribed by the Convention. The absence of legal safeguards, when there is frequent denial of legal counsel and medical care and use of incommunicado detention, creates a conducive environment and increases the likelihood of torture.

Members of the ruling family have also been subjected to enforced disappearance. Following his arrest in January 2018, Salman Al Saud was transferred to Al-Ha'ir Prison and held incommunicado for seven months, during which he was subject to enforced disappearance. After being transferred in early 2019, with his father Abdulaziz Al Saud, to detention in a private villa belonging to the authorities, on 28 March 2020 Salman was taken by masked men from the detention villa and moved to an unknown location, to be forcibly disappeared for a further two months before being returned to his father at the end of May. More recently, on 28 November 2020, Salman and his father were moved to an unknown location; they remain missing at the time of writing this report.

Basma bint Saud Al Saud was also subjected to enforced disappearance for more than a month after her arrest in March 2019, and was unable to contact her family until April 2019. During this time she was denied the health care she needed for a potentially life-threatening condition. Basma remains forcibly disappeared, and there are fears for her health deteriorating and being deliberately neglected by the authorities.

Hunger strikes over ill-treatment and harassment

As a consequence of the harassment and intimidation facing prisoners of conscience inside prison, including being held incommunicado and denied family contact, prisoners have sometimes gone on hunger strike to demand improvements to their conditions and to obtain their rights. At the start of 2020, prisoners of conscience **Khaled al-Omair** and **Waleed Abu al-Khair** were on hunger strike over their ill-treatment in prison and denial of their basic rights. Abu al-Khair, who began his hunger strike on 11 December 2019 in protest against being transferred to a high security unit, was transferred to hospital over fears concerning his health; he announced the ending of his hunger strike on 6 February 2020 after being transferred back to his previous prison accommodation. Al-Omair, on hunger strike since December 2019 in protest against his prolonged detention without charge, announced the suspension of his hunger strike on 11 February 2020 after the Public Prosecutor's Office informed him that State Security had handed his case over to it.

Likewise, **Loujain al-Hathloul** undertook two hunger strikes during the year over being repeatedly denied contact with the outside world, and particularly her family. She went on hunger strike from 17-23 August in protest at having been denied visits and phone calls for nearly three months, and began a second hunger strike on 26 October in protest against her prison conditions and, again, denial of contact. After two weeks, when the prison authorities started harassing her by waking her up every two hours, she was forced to end her hunger strike out of mental exhaustion.

On 19 December 2020, human rights defender and ACPRA co-founder **Mohammed al-Qahtani** began a hunger strike in prison in protest at being denied family contact, access to books and essential medication. He ended the hunger strike on 30 December after the authorities said they would meet his demands.

ALQST believes that no prisoner should need to resort to such drastic action to secure their rights, and even their health and well-being. Indeed, the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the "Nelson Mandela Rules") explicitly state that the provision of health care for prisoners "is a State responsibility" and that prisoners "shall be allowed to communicate with their family and friends at regular intervals".

5 Unfair Trial Proceedings

Judicial proceedings in Saudi Arabia are marred by numerous violations of international fair trial guarantees, including the denial of access to lawyers and court documents, undue delays, and the use of secret trials. Both regular criminal courts and the Specialised Criminal Court (SCC), an exceptional jurisdiction set up in 2008 to try cases of terrorism, are well known for their disregard of legal safeguards. The right to a fair trial was frequently violated throughout 2020, with many prisoners of conscience and detainees brought to court in unfair trial proceedings, and with several sentenced to prison in relation to their human rights activism and for exercising their right to free speech.

Following the postponement by Saudi Arabia's Supreme Judicial Council of court hearings from 15 March 2020, in light of the COVID-19 outbreak, the courts reopened in August. There soon followed a wave of trial proceedings, including the trial of several women human rights defenders (WHRDs); human rights activists Khaled al-Omair and Mohamed al-Otaibi; the "April 2019" detainees; and Islamic scholars Salman al-Odah and Hassan al-Maliki. Prison sentences were issued by the SCC against, among others, WHRDs Loujain al-Hathloul and Mayaa al-Zahrani, writer Abdullah al-Maliki, and doctor Walid Fitaihi. Meanwhile, the Criminal Court "concluded" its sham trial for the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi by sentencing eight of the original 11 defendants to prison, some still unnamed, the final parody of justice in a trial that lacked any transparency.

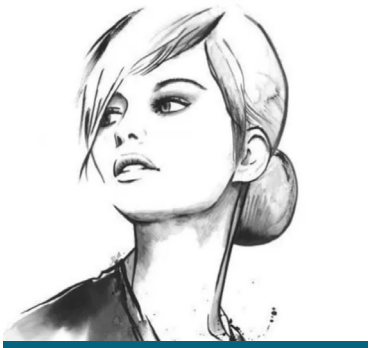
Trial of women human rights defenders (WHRDs)

The trial of the women human rights defenders (WHRDs) arrested between May and July 2018, which began in Riyadh in March 2019, resumed in 2020 and resulted in a number of prison sentences being handed down following severely flawed trials. After months of delays and prolonged detention without their trials proceeding, on 25 November 2020 **Nouf Abdelaziz**, **Loujain al-Hathloul**, **Nassima al-Sadah**, **Mayaa al-Zahrani** and **Samar Badawi** were brought before the Criminal Court in Riyadh in separate trial sessions. Loujain al-Hathloul's case was transferred to the Specialised Criminal Court in December after the Criminal Court concluded that it was "outside its jurisdiction".

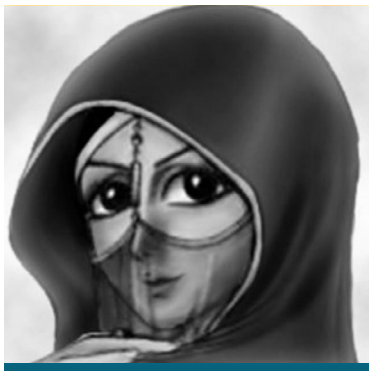
When the case began in March 2019, after nearly a year of arbitrary detention, the authorities had intended to try the WHRDs in the SCC, but they pulled back at the last minute under international pressure and moved the trial to the Criminal Court in Riyadh, illustrating the fact that the Saudi judiciary lacks independence, and that the charges brought against the women were politically motivated. Foreign diplomats and international journalists were routinely barred from entering the courtroom to monitor the hearings.

Samar Badawi

Nassima al-Sadah



Mayaa al-Zahrani



Nouf Abdelaziz

On 10 December 2020, during the first session of Loujain al-Hathloul's trial to take place in the SCC, the Public Prosecution presented an amended indictment against her, to which several changes had been made without al-Hathloul or her legal representatives being informed. The most significant of these amendments was the removal of references to the UK and Dutch governments and the European Union, and the names and nationalities of individuals with whom al-Hathloul allegedly communicated and whom she intended to call as witnesses. The Public Prosecution also asked for her trial to be continued on the basis of the Law on Combating Crimes of Terrorism and its Financing (the Counter-Terrorism Law) and called for the maximum penalty under that Law of up to 20 years in prison.

ALQST has reviewed both the original and the amended indictments, published by members of al-Hathloul's family, and can confirm that all of the charges relate to her human rights activism. This includes joining a group on Telegram called "Sawaleef (chit-chat)" where she discussed human rights; liaising with human rights defender Khaled al-Omair over a "campaign for a new constitution"; and receiving daily expenses of 50 Euros from foreign organisations while attending international conferences to speak about the situation of women in Saudi Arabia. At a second session in the SCC, on 14 December 2020, al-Hathloul was handed the evidence presented against her by the Prosecution, which included social media posts she made on Twitter supporting campaigns for women driving and for abolition of the male guardianship system.

Loujain al-Hathloul

As well as facing trial in the SCC, al-Hathloul was brought before the regular Criminal Court in Riyadh again on 17 December and 22 December, in yet another demonstration that the judicial process lacks independence and is run according to political fiat. The court had said it would open an investigation into al-Hathloul's claim that she was tortured in detention, but at the session held on 22 December the judge wound up the so-called investigation and denied that the torture had taken place, a clear charade lacking any credibility.

On 28 December 2020, the SCC sentenced al-Hathloul to five years and eight months in prison, a verdict that was widely condemned internationally. The sentence included a suspension of two years and 10 months, which, given the time al-Hathloul has already spent in detention, means that she is expected to be released in early 2021. The sentence, which can be appealed by either al-Hathloul or the Prosecution, places al-Hathloul under heavy restrictions following her release, including three years of probation and a five-year travel ban. Mayaa al-Zahrani was handed the same sentence, also on charges relating to her peaceful activism.

> The sentencing of the women human rights defenders, whose plight attracted significant attention around the world, highlights the importance of international pressure, without which they would likely have been punished even more harshly.

Fellow WHRDs **Hatoon al-Fassi**, **Amal al-Harbi**, **Maysaa al-Manea**, **Abeer Namankani**, **Shadan al-Onezi**, **Aziza al-Yousef** and **Eman al-Nafjan**, who are on temporary release, continue to face trial.

The sentencing of the women human rights defenders, whose plight attracted significant attention around the world, highlights the importance of international pressure, without which they would likely have been punished even more harshly. The fact that some of them may be released in early 2021, albeit under heavy restrictions, points to the politically influenced nature of the Saudi courts and can be seen partly as a response to the election of a new US administration that is likely to take a more critical stance towards the rulers of Saudi Arabia than the Trump administration did, which repeatedly deflected any criticism.

Aziza al-Yousef

Eman al-Nafjan

Maysaa al-Manea

Crackdown on women human rights defenders

On 15 May 2018, the Saudi authorities launched a campaign of arrests of women human rights defenders (WHRDs) as well as several men who advocated for women's rights. This crackdown on activists was unprecedented in its ferocity. It was also the first time the authorities had targeted women activists en masse, arbitrarily detaining Loujain al-Hathloul, Aziza al-Yousef and Eman al-Nafjan, as well as Mohammed al-Rabiah, in coordinated late-night raids on their homes. Further arrests followed between May and July 2018, targeting Hatoon al-Fassi, Amal al-Harbi, Maysaa al-Manea, Ruqiya al-Muhareb, Abeer Namankani, Shadan al-Onezi, Nouf Abdulaziz, Mayaa al-Zahrani, Nassima al-Sadah and Samar Badawi.

The arrests occurred in the weeks just before and after the lifting on 24 June 2018 of the driving ban on women in Saudi Arabia. While on the one hand recognising women's long-denied right to drive, the authorities on the other hand took away the basic freedoms of the courageous women who had campaigned for gender equality and an end to the male guardianship system. These women had in fact been at the forefront of the women's rights movement in Saudi Arabia for many years, not only campaigning for the right to drive but also demanding full citizenship, and above all equality and respect for women in a country that treated them as minors reliant on a male guardian to manage their lives.

In the months following their arrests, ALQST was informed that many of the WHRDs faced sexual harassment, torture and other forms of ill-treatment during interrogation, including being stripped naked, groped, beaten and subjected to electric shocks. Moreover, the authorities subjected the women to psychological torture, threatening them with death or rape and falsely informing one woman of a family member's death. The women were taken to unofficial places of detention nicknamed "the hotel" and the "officers' guesthouse", where high state officials including Saud al-Qahtani, a close advisor to Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, were present and involved in their torture.

The trial of the WHRDs began in Riyadh in March 2019. The Saudi authorities initially claimed that the women had communicated with foreign intelligence, and led a smear campaign in state media portraying them as traitors, but in the end the charge sheets made no mention of contact with intelligence agencies. Instead, nearly all the charges that the public prosecution brought against them were related to their promoting women's rights and calling for an end to the male guardianship system, as well as sharing information with journalists, diplomats and international human rights organisations.

Due to mounting international pressure, including a resolution by the European Parliament and two joint statements by groups of UN member states in 2019, Hatoon al-Fassi, Amal al-Harbi, Maysaa al-Manea, Ruqiya al-Muhareb, Abeer Namankani, Shadan al-Onezi, Aziza al-Yousef and Eman al-Nafjan were granted temporary release, but continue to live under heavy restrictions as their trial remains ongoing. Loujain al-Hathloul, Samar Badawi, Nassima al-Sadah, Nouf Abdelaziz and Mayaa al-Zahrani remain in detention.

Trials of human rights activists

Following the resumption of the courts in August 2020, new trial proceedings commenced before the Specialised Criminal Court in Riyadh for several human rights activists. In a message that ALQST received from detained human rights activist **Khaled al-Omair**, headlined "Save the Prisoners of Conscience", he described being brought before the SCC on 8 September 2020, where the Public Prosecution accused him of leading a campaign for a constitution and creating a hashtag on Twitter.

Khaled al-Omair

Al-Omair, who attended court with his feet in shackles, refused to respond to the Prosecution's allegations, due to the denial of his basic rights and the court's lack of impartiality. He was told by the court that if he did not respond then the accusations would be accepted. In a further hearing, on 8 December 2020, his next session was set for 25 January 2021, at which the verdict may be issued.

Mohamed al-Otaibi

Khaled al-Omair was arrested previously by secret police on 1 January 2009 in Riyadh after taking part in a peaceful demonstration in support of Gaza, and was sentenced to eight years in prison. Several others were also arrested for taking part in the demonstration, including fellow human rights activist **Mohamed al-Otaibi**, who was sentenced to three years.

Al-Otaibi subsequently continued his human rights work, and is currently serving a 14-year prison sentence imposed by the SCC for offences including "forming an unlicensed organisation" (Al-Ittehad Human Rights Association). He was arrested on 24 May 2017 at Doha International Airport while on his way to Norway, where he had been accepted for political asylum. He was then extradited from Qatar to Saudi Arabia, where he was tried and sentenced.

On 25 July 2019, al-Otaibi was brought back to court in a new trial, to face four new charges of "fleeing justice", "going to Qatar", "communicating with foreign entities" and "interfering in public affairs". Several further sessions of his trial have taken place since then, including in 2020, which have been marred by numerous violations of international fair trial guarantees, including denial of access to a lawyer and to documents he needs to prepare his response to the charges. He most recently appeared before the SCC for a hearing on 1 December 2020, at which he was sentenced to one year in prison, which is to be added on to his existing 14-year term.

The rights to freedom of assembly and association

Public demonstrations are prohibited in Saudi Arabia, and freedom of assembly is not respected; indeed the government has imposed harsh punishments – including the death penalty – on people who have led or participated in public protests. Hundreds of individuals are being detained in Saudi Arabia for activities that fall within the category of free assembly. Many activists have been convicted on charges of taking part in demonstrations or peaceful protests. Some have been sentenced to death for offences including demonstrating, and some have been tortured into confessing to things they have not done. While no large-scale demonstrations or marches tend to take place in Saudi Arabia due to the repressive environment, smaller protests are staged from time to time in various parts of the country, particularly in the mainly Shia al-Qatif governorate.

The right to freedom of association is severely curbed in Saudi Arabia. There is no law guaranteeing the right to form labour unions or organise strikes, and workers who engage in such activities are liable to punishment, including prison, or expulsion in the case of non-Saudi nationals. There is, however, some provision for "workers' committees" to do basic collective bargaining. Although a Law on Associations and Foundations was introduced in 2015 for the first time, it does not permit the establishment of human rights organisations, and some of its provisions are clearly designed to restrict the formation of fully independent civil society associations and institutions.

Also brought before the SCC in 2020 were 13 activists, writers and family members of women human rights defenders, who were all arrested within a short space of time in April 2019. They are: **Salah al-Haidar**, son of women human rights defender Aziza al-Yousef (currently facing unfair trial); writers **Bader al-Ibrahi**m, **Mohammed al-Sadiq**, **Thumar al-Marzouqi**, **Abdullah al-Duhailan**, **Nayef al-Hindas**, **Ali al-Saffar**, **Redha al-Boori** and **Khadija al-Harbi**; novelist **Moqbel al-Saqqar**; activists Fahad Abalkhail and **Ayman al-Drees**; and lawyer **Abdullah al-Shehri**. After being held without charge for more than a year, and most of them being interrogated about their cultural activities, they were finally brought to court on 30 September 2020. At the second session of their trial, on 21 December, the date for the next session was set for 8 March 2021.

Islamic scholars facing death penalty

Trial proceedings continued in the cases of Islamic scholars **Salman al-Odah** and **Hassan Farhan al-Maliki**, in which the public prosecutor is calling for death sentences to be passed against them. Al-Maliki attended a trial session on 8 March 2020, his first court appearance since he received the charges against him in September 2018, and he responded to them. The charges, which are vague and contravene his right to express his opinion, include his "lack of commitment to good citizenship". His trial remains ongoing. His son, **al-Abbas Hassan al-Maliki**, who was arrested in September 2017 on account of a tweet about his father's arrest, was also brought before the SCC, and was sentenced on 6 September 2020 to a four-year prison sentence, charged with "posting tweets sympathising with his father" and "destroying electronic evidence".

Salman al-Odah

Hassan Farhan al-Maliki

Trial sessions continued to drag on in the case of Islamic scholar Salman al-Odah, detained since 2017 after calling for mediation in a dispute between the rulers of Saudi Arabia and Qatar. He faces 37 unlawful charges, most of which relate to his peaceful expression of opinions and religious views. Following dozens of trial sessions in 2019, a majority of which were postponed for unknown reasons, at a trial session on 18 October 2020 the SCC again postponed his trial without giving a reason. On 17 November 2020, Salman al-Odah's brother Khaled al-Odah was sentenced to a five-year prison term followed by a five-year travel ban, on charges including "sympathising with his brother Salman al-Odah" and "mixing private and public business".

September 2017 arrests

In September 2017, the Saudi authorities carried out a wave of arrests targeting dozens of clerics, academics, activists, writers, and journalists. They included individuals such as cleric Salman al-Odah, writer Abdullah al-Maliki and economist Essam al-Zamel among many others. The majority remain in prison to this day, either being held in detention without charge or serving sentences on charges relating to free speech.

Prisoners of conscience sentenced

In addition to the cases already mentioned above, several prisoners of conscience have been handed lengthy prison sentences since the resumption of the courts in August 2020. On 3 September, the SCC issued prison sentences against several detainees held arbitrarily since September 2017. Writer **Abdullah al-Maliki** was sentenced to seven years in prison on charges related to his cultural activities, such as "possession of banned books", and other charges including defending members of civil rights group ACPRA. On the same day, the court sentenced **Ibrahim al-Harthi** to five years, writer **Ahmad al-Sawian** to three years, academic **Yousef al-Qassim** to five years, **Khaled al-Ojaimi** to three years and eight months and journalist **Fahad al-Sunaidi** to three and a half years on charges relating to free speech. On 3 October, prison sentences were issued against three more detainees held arbitrarily since September 2017, with **Nayef al-Sahafi** sentenced to 10 years, **Mosad al-Kathiri** to three and a half years, and **Ali Badahdah** to six years.

The Saudi authorities tortured **Walid Fitaihi** in detention on several separate occasions, including by way of slappings, beatings, stripping him naked and subjecting him to electric shocks, and his physical and mental state deteriorated rapidly.

On 6 October, businessman and economist **Essam al-Zamel** was sentenced to 15 years in prison. Al-Zamel was arrested in September 2017 after expressing support for human rights and criticising MBS's plan to sell off the state oil company, Saudi Aramco. And trial proceedings continued in the case of medical doctor **Walid Fitaihi**, who was arrested on 5 November 2017 as part of the crown prince's so-called "anti-corruption drive" (see page 16 above). According to credible reports, Saudi authorities tortured him in detention on several separate occasions, including by way of slappings, beatings, stripping him naked and subjecting him to electric shocks, and his physical and mental state deteriorated rapidly. Following the resumption of his trial, on 8 December 2020 the SCC sentenced him to six years in prison on vague charges including "breaking allegiance with the ruler" and "sympathising with a terrorist organisation". Following appeal, on 14 January 2021 the SCC reduced his sentence to three years and two months in prison (with half of it suspended) and a travel ban of the same length. The case of Fitaihi, a dual US-Saudi citizen, had drawn some condemnation from the US administration.

The Specialised Criminal Court (SCC)

The Specialised Criminal Court is an exceptional jurisdiction set up in 2008 to try cases of terrorism. Like the regular criminal courts, it is well known for its disregard of legal safeguards, including the denial of legal counsel, coerced confessions being admitted as evidence in court, denial of access to criminal files, and insufficient time being given to prepare a defence. Trial hearings are often held in secret and the defendants themselves are at times denied access to their own hearings.

Since its establishment, the SCC has shown itself to lack any independence, proceeding with unfair trials and invoking repressive legislation, namely the Law on Combating Crimes of Terrorism and its Financing (the Counter-Terrorism Law) against activists and reformers in an attempt to stifle free speech.

Trial of Palestinians and Jordanians

At the beginning of 2019, the authorities carried out the mass arrest of at least 68 Palestinians and Jordanians with a connection to the Palestinian cause, including **Mohammed Saleh al-Khudari**, a leading Palestinian official and long-term resident of Saudi Arabia, and **Amer al-Alma'i**, an internal medicine consultant. On 8 March 2020, the 68 Palestinians and Jordanians were brought before the SCC. Neither their relatives nor international observers from foreign embassies were able to attend the trial, and there were no independent lawyers present.

Mohammed al-Khudari

In court, the Public Prosecutor read out the charges against the group. Most of them revolved around membership of the Palestinian group Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood; collecting donations for Palestine; and using the internet to write about the Muslim Brotherhood. The Public Prosecutor invoked the Counter-Terrorism Law (notably Articles 32, 33, 38, 47, 53 and 55) and the Anti-Cybercrime Law, especially Article 6. Their trial remains ongoing.

Jamal Khashoggi murder

Jamal Khashoggi

On 7 September 2020, the Criminal Court in Riyadh commuted five death sentences passed previously in the Jamal Khashoggi murder case to long prison terms instead, noted that jail sentences had been handed to three other defendants, and declared the case finally "closed". ALQST condemned the Saudi authorities' failure to secure justice for Jamal Khashoggi and hold to account those responsible for ordering as well as executing his murder. It continues to call for an impartial, independent, international investigation and trial to resolve the still-unanswered questions of who planned and ordered Khashoggi's killing, and what happened to his body.

The trial of 11 individuals accused in the murder of the Saudi journalist, who was lured into the Saudi consulate in Istanbul on 2 October 2018 and was there assassinated and dismembered by a team of Saudi agents, had beenmarred throughout by flawed judicial proceedings and shrouded in secrecy. The Saudi authorities had at first denied the killing and obstructed all investigation of the crime, but then conducted their own opaque and politically driven inquiry and prosecuted 11 people in a trial widely criticised for lacking all transparency and accountability.

The trial began on 3 January 2019 in Riyadh's Criminal Court. The prosecution referred to Khashoggi's murder as a "rogue" operation, and demanded the death penalty for five of the 11 defendants. However, the identities of the accused, as well as their roles in relation to the government and details of the exact charges they faced, were initially kept secret. On 23 December 2019 the court sentenced Fahad Shabib Al-Balawi, Turki Muserref Alshehri, Waleed Abdullah Alshehri, Maher Abdulaziz Mutreb and Salah Mohammed Tubaigy to death and three others to prison for the gruesome killing. Although the UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, Agnès Callamard, found "credible evidence" that Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and other senior Saudi officials were responsible for the killing, the Crown Prince's role was not even addressed in court, and the other officials were exonerated.

In light of the total absence of justice for the murder, a Turkish court has undertaken a trial in absentia of 26 Saudi officials. Following an indictment by Turkish prosecutors in March 2020, the first trial session took place on 3 July, at which eight witnesses gave evidence. The second session of the trial took place on 24 November, and ALQST was present in court to monitor the proceedings. Ayman Nour, an Egyptian opposition leader and owner of Al-Sharq TV channel, was present as the only witness at the hearing. The next session will be held on 4 March 2021. This trial in Turkey is no substitute for an independent, international criminal investigation – which ALQST has long called for – but, given the absolute miscarriage of justice in the Saudi courts, it at least offers a chance to resolve some still-unanswered questions and provide a potential path to justice.

6 Forced Displacement

Land seizures and forced displacement are longstanding practices of the Saudi authorities, including the unlawful acquisition of land and properties, often on sites earmarked for development projects. In recent years there have been several cases of expropriation of lands and displacement of the inhabitants. Examples include the displacement, from 2017 on, of hundreds of residents in the city of Awamiya following unrest in the region, as well as the deportation of inhabitants of Kharkhir governorate following administrative changes. While the reasons for such practices vary, they are all marked by numerous rights violations on the ground, including the unlawful demolition of homes and buildings, the use of force and coercion, and a failure to provide basic services or compensation.

The practice of forced displacement featured heavily in 2020, the starkest example being the eviction of thousands of members of the Huwaitat tribe in the Red Sea area in order to push forward the grandiose Neom megacity project. These displacements have been accompanied by coercive pressure, arbitrary arrests, propaganda campaigns, a lack of adequate compensation and the extrajudicial killing of local resident Abdul Rahim al-Huwaiti. Further demolitions have also taken place elsewhere in 2020.

Violations accompanying the Neom megacity project

Repeated violations have been committed by the Saudi authorities throughout 2020 in their bid to remove local inhabitants from their homes in order to proceed with their Neom megacity project, part of Mohammed bin Salman's Vision 2030 economic development programme. The area earmarked for the project, in the Tabuk region of north-western Saudi Arabia on the Red Sea, has been inhabited for centuries primarily by members of the Huwaitat tribe.

Local communities had been concerned about their land since April 2017, when land transfers and licence renewals were suspended. This was because the Saudi Public Investment Fund (PIF) had acquired title to the whole area, ahead of the Neom project's public announcement on 24 October 2017. In response to action by local residents, including going to the regional authorities, launching a campaign and submitting petitions, the authorities told them that rumours of evictions were unfounded, while in fact construction work was already under way, in utmost secrecy, and emergency acquisition orders were being issued for privately owned land.

The concerns of local inhabitants were realised on 1 January 2020, when local authorities informed residents of the villages of al-Khuraiba, Sharma and Gayal that they were to be compulsorily evicted, as their land was required for the Neom megacity project. Despite local people expressing their opposition to the decision, including at a public conference held on 7 January, committees from the Social Development department arrived in the area within two weeks of the eviction order being announced. They put up signs in the streets asking residents to report to the committees to identify their holdings on the land registry, and relinquish them. Meanwhile, local people met with representatives of the Social Development committees and once again expressed their opposition.

> When the authorities arrived at the home of **Abdul Rahim al-Huwaiti**, he filmed them and posted videos on social media, criticising the forced eviction of his tribe and describing it as "state terrorism". Early the following morning, Special Forces attacked his house with heavy weapons, killing him.

In March 2020, the authorities began pressuring people by sending in Special Forces, sometimes in groups of more than 40 vehicles at a time, to raid the homes of those resisting eviction, aiming to intimidate people and coerce them into reporting to the committees and agreeing to being unfairly evicted from their homes. At least twenty residents were arrested, some of whom, according to sources, were arrested for coming to the defence of a kidnapped child, Salem bin Rashid al-Taqiqi. The child was driven away in a civilian car, but when family members pursued the kidnappers to try to free the child, it transpired that the kidnappers were from the Mabaheth secret police. They said the child had been taken to be detained after he wrote on walls the slogan "We Will Not Be Moved".

Most people declined to visit the committees and give details of their landholdings and houses, so the committees started visiting people in their homes, escorted by security forces, to list and measure properties by force. On 12 April 2020 **Abdul Rahim al-Huwaiti**, a resident of al-Khuraiba village and member of the Huwaitat tribe, refused to allow a land registry committee into his home. When the authorities arrived at his home, he filmed them and posted videos on social media, criticising the forced eviction of his tribe and describing it as "state terrorism". Early the following morning, on 13 April 2020, dozens of Special Forces surrounded his house, accompanied by several armoured trucks. According to witnesses, at 5:40am the Special Forces attacked his house with heavy weapons, killing him. After his death the authorities held on to al-Huwaiti's body for a week, insisting he should be buried in Tabuk. When his family refused, and as pressure mounted in the media, the authorities agreed to hand the body over to his family for burial in al-Khuraiba amid heavy security measures.

No investigation was conducted into the actions of the Special Forces. Instead, the authorities offered financial incentives to government-appointed tribal sheikhs and other notables of the Huwaitat tribe, on condition that they publicly condemn al-Huwaiti's resistance to eviction. Indeed, while al-Huwaiti's funeral was taking place, the Tabuk emirate called a meeting with some of these government-appointed tribal sheikhs and Huwaitat notables, and urged them to organise an event at which they would publicly condemn Abdul Rahim's actions. During the meeting at the emirate offices, those who attended were given 100,000 Saudi riyals (US$27,000) each, and each sheikh was given 300,000 Saudi riyals (US$80,000), to buy their agreement. In exchange, they took part in a propaganda exercise involving a small-scale public celebration at which they formally disowned Abdul Rahim and other members of the tribe who resisted eviction.

The authorities also rejected local inhabitants' requests to be resettled at a site nearby, and instead offered 620,000 Saudi riyals (US$165,000) in compensation for inhabitants to resettle on their own, and at locations much further away. However, it has been reported that some of those offered this compensation have received as little as 17,000 Saudi riyals (US$4,500).

The Neom project, which has been mired in secrecy from the start and marked by violations throughout 2020, shows the extent to which the Saudi authorities are prepared to proceed with planned projects at the expense of local inhabitants. Moreover, the project and the human rights violations accompanying it have implications for the foreign companies involved. In June 2020, ALQST and other NGOs sent a joint letter to several management consulting firms involved in Neom, expressing concern that their involvement had failed to prevent the adverse human rights impact on the local population, including the violation of their rights of access to land, which runs against the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights. In a positive move, on 29 July 2020 the game developer and esports tournament organiser Riot Games announced the cancellation of a sponsorship deal with Neom, following a backlash from fans over Saudi Arabia's human rights record.

Demolitions and displacement

Other demolitions also took place throughout 2020. While ALQST has not been able to verify with total certainty this information from people on the ground, they nevertheless point to a pattern of demolitions of buildings alleged to have been built without permits, usually carried out without warning or judicial oversight and sometimes accompanied by other violations.

On 10 June 2020, a young girl was reportedly killed in her sleep as bulldozers demolished her family home in the governorate of Harajah, in the southern region of Asir, which authorities allege was constructed without a licence.

In September 2020, a number of homes were demolished in the village of al-Khashba in Medina Province, which led to some local protest. A municipality announcement said that 640,000 square metres of dwellings had been cleared, purportedly for being on government land. Also in September, a home demolition was carried out in the village of Thurba in the governorate of al-Ula, and in October 2020 a residential home was demolished in the governorate of Dawadmi, both described as "encroachments"on government land.

Such examples likely only represent a small fraction of demolitions that have taken place without prior warning or consultation, and many other properties and inhabitants may be at risk. Saudi Arabia has not yet ratified the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), which requires parties to respect the right to adequate housing.

Kharkhir governorate

On 31 December 2014, in an administrative change, a royal decree abolished the governorate of Kharkhir, a small town close to the Yemen border inhabited by around six thousand people at the time. Its governmental centres and jobs were to be transferred to another location in Najran, southwest Saudi Arabia.

The following year, videos began to surface of Kharkhir's community expressing surprise at the absence of medical staff in the general hospital, as well as the closure of a local school following the transfer. They also appealed to the king to halt their displacement, to allow them to renew their identity documents, and to grant them citizenship. Historically, Kharkhir's community were never granted citizenship, and were instead given identity documents granting only limited access to services.

By 2017, videos showed the governorate to be largely empty of residents. In

November 2018, the Emir of Najran, Jalawi bin Abdulaziz bin Musaed, appeared in a video vowing to personally evict those residents remaining in Kharkhir. The local community continued to send appeals about the lack of compensation following the transfer and the lack of government facilities available to those who remained, including access to housing in accordance with their rights, and registration of their children's identity papers

Demolition of Musawwara

In 2016, the Saudi authorities announced plans to demolish the Musawwara neighbourhood, a densely populated and historic residential area in the town of Awamiya in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province, in order to build new development projects, including a model 'heritage village' centre.

Local residents had previously petitioned the authorities to develop al-Musawwara as a heritage site and maintain its buildings, plans which the authorities welcomed and for which they proposed a reported budget of 900 million Saudi riyals (US$240 milllion).

As demolitions and evictions began in May 2017 they met some local resistance, and the Saudi authorities carried out a military operation involving excessive use of armed force, including artillery, resulting in deaths and injuries and causing significant damage to the town.

United Nations Special Rapporteurs on cultural rights, adequate housing and extreme poverty condemned Saudi Arabia's use of force and the demolitions, which constituted forced eviction under international human rights law.

Stateless persons

As demonstrated in earlier examples, notably that of Kharkhir, people who are forcibly evicted or displaced in Saudi Arabia may find themselves unable to access basic government services, or even establish citizenship. The kingdom is already host to a large number of stateless persons, known as "Bidoon" (meaning in Arabic "without", i.e. without nationality), who suffer in every aspect of their lives. In the absence of official statistics, estimates suggest the number of Bidoon to be anywhere between 70,000 and 250,000 individuals. They consist mainly of descendants of nomadic tribes who

failed to register for Saudi nationality when the nation state was being formed in the 1930s, and the so-called "mawalid al-mamlaka" (born in the kingdom), several generations of people born and raised in the country with no pathway to citizenship simply because their grandparents overstayed their residence permits. For both, Saudi Arabia is the only country they have ever known or lived in.

Saudi Arabia's "Bidoon"

Whatever the reasons for their statelessness, the Bidoon today struggle and suffer hardship in every aspect of their lives. There are no clear or specific arrangements for their education, and while some manage with great difficulty to enrol in primary education, others are unable to do so – and higher education is completely out of reach. Stateless persons are not entitled to medical treatment either, and there have been cases where hospitals have turned them away, even in emergencies, because they do not have a Saudi ID card or passport. As a general rule, the Bidoon cannot work or earn an income, yet the government offers them no financial support. The authorities do not normally allow them to work in the public sector, but neither do they let them register private businesses or property, so sometimes the only way they can live is by doing menial jobs in the informal economy or with the help of charities.

Stateless persons' lack of documentation also heavily impacts their family lives and means that their marriages are not officially registered, even if the person they are marrying has citizenship, and they similarly struggle to obtain birth certificates for their children. Being deprived of both their civil and political rights and their economic, social and cultural rights, stateless persons in Saudi Arabia have an extremely hard existence and are often forced into a life of grinding poverty or crime. The numbers of Bidoon are growing, and with no serious or swift solutions in sight the situation is likely to become even worse.

Saudi Arabia has ratified neither the Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons nor the Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness, and Saudi nationality law, officially referred to as the Saudi Arabian Citizenship System, is severely flawed. Article 9, for example, requires applicants for citizenship to supply documents relating to their previous nationality, which the Bidoon do not have. In addition, Article 10 contains a loophole giving ultimate power in cases of naturalisation to the Ministry of Interior, stating that "the Minister of Interior has the right, in all cases and without giving a reason, to refuse consent to the granting of Saudi Arabian citizenship to an eligible foreigner". The Bidoon therefore continue to live a life in limbo without any legal protection.

7 Death Penalty

Saudi Arabia has for many years been among the countries carrying out the highest numbers of executions in the world. In 2019, 185 individuals were executed, the highest number in recent Saudi history, but in 2020 – whether as a possible side-effect of the COVID-19 pandemic, an announced moratorium on death sentences for drug-related offences or in light of international pressure – the number of executions in the kingdom fell to 27.

In April 2020, the Saudi Human Rights Commission announced that a decree had been issued by King Salman that would end Saudi judges' discretion to apply the death penalty to minors. However, the text contained significant loopholes, and the decree was never published.

Fall in the number of executions

A total of 27 individuals were executed in 2020 according to Saudi Arabia's official Human Rights Commission, of which ALQST was aware of 24, marking a significant and welcome reduction in comparison to previous years. The majority were executed on conviction for murder, but they also included cases like **Abdulmohsen al-Ghamidi**, executed on 8 April 2020, who was arrested while he was a minor.

2020 took the number of executions carried out since the accession of King Salman in January 2015 to more than 800, with a total of 158 executions in 2015, 154 in 2016, 146 in 2017, 150 in 2018 and 185 in 2019. A large number of these were for non-violent drug offences handed down at the discretion of the judge (ta'zir) against foreign nationals, while others were for offences described by the authorities as terrorism-related but which consisted of peaceful actions.

On 18 January 2021, Saudi Arabia's Human Rights Commission announced that the reduction in 2020 was linked to a moratorium on death penalties for drug-related offences, and while it is true that no executions for drug-related offences have been carried out since January 2020, no change in the law has yet been published. The reduction in 2020 is a positive development but, given the absence of any published change in the law, use of the death penalty remains at the discretion of judges and the authorities, and the numbers of executions could well rise again. In December 2020 alone eight more executions were carried out, all for murders, and it is possible that the rate could pick up again in 2021, especially as the COVID-19 crisis has eased and now that international attention on Saudi Arabia has subsided following the G20 summit in November 2020.

Reported royal decree on minors

In April 2020, the kingdom's government-sponsored Human Rights Commission (HRC) announced that a new royal decree was about to end the death penalty for minors. It portrayed this as a major step towards reform of the Saudi criminal justice system aimed at bringing it into line with international human rights standards. However, the Saudi authorities omitted to point out notable exemptions in the text that left it largely meaningless, and the decree in question was never officially published.

The death sentence aginst **Ali al-Nimr** still stands, and there are other cases where the Public Prosecution continues to call for the death penalty against defendants for crimes committed when they were minors.

The first flaw in the decree on abolition of the death penalty for minors (as trailed by the HRC) is that it appears to protect only child defendants sentenced to death by ta'zir (i.e. at the discretion of a judge) and to exclude death sentences passed as hudud or qisas (see box below for the different bases on which the death penalty may be applied). Furthermore, the announced decree excluded those sentenced by ta'zir when tried under the Counter-Terrorism Law, a law which has significant legal shortcomings, including the way it criminalises peaceful actions.

The three bases on which Saudi judges may apply the death penalty

Ta'zir

The concept behind ta'zir punishments is that there is no clear rationale for sentencing once a verdict is reached. In the absence of a criminal code in Saudi Arabia, the appropriate penalty is a matter for the judge's discretion if it is not something laid down in the Qur'an or Sunna (teachings of the Prophet). Most religious scholars do not accept that ta'zir, judicial discretion, can extend to the death penalty, but the Saudi authorities insist on giving judges the power to hand down this punishment on anyone as they see fit, according to their own personal judgement.

Qisas (requital, a form of retributive justice)

Qisas is what the Qur'an prescribes with regard to the killing of someone who has deliberately committed murder, if the victim's blood relatives refuse to waive their right (and it is not the government's right) to avenge the killing. Religious scholars broadly agree that the blood relatives can either waive or exercise their right to take vengeance on the killer by demanding his execution.

Hudud

These are fixed punishments for specific crimes prescribed in Islamic law, as interpreted by the Saudi authorities.

In a welcome move, on 26 August 2020, after intense political pressure, the Public Prosecution ordered the review of death sentences against **Ali al-Nimr**, **Dawoud al-Marhoun** and **Abdullah al-Zaher** for acts they allegedly committed when they were minors. However, al-Nimr's death sentence still stands, and it is likely that there are other cases in which the Public Prosecution continues to call for the death penalty against defendants for crimes committed when they were minors.

At the time the decree on minors was announced in April 2020, another decree was also announced to end flogging as a judicial punishment. Yet in similar fashion it applies only to flogging prescribed by ta'zir, and while the majority of floggings are ordered on the basis of ta'zir there are also some hudud crimes, such as consumption of alcohol and adultery, that are still punished with flogging.

8 Cosmetic Reforms

In a bid to improve Saudi Arabia's image, the authorities have undertaken a number of reforms in recent years, including lifting some of the restrictions women face under the oppressive male guardianship system. However, these measures still fall far short of the changes needed to achieve gender equality, and are riddled with loopholes. The male guardianship system has still not been dismantled, and as 2020 came to an end it continued to significantly hamper the lives of Saudi women.

In October 2020, the authorities announced reforms to the notorious kafala (sponsorship) system, under which foreigners working in Saudi Arabia are tied to an individual resident who acts as his or her sponsor. However, as with the male guardianship system, the kafala system has not yet been dismantled, and the new arrangements again contain loopholes and exemptions.

2020 ends with women still subject to male control

Despite much boasting by the Saudi authorities that they are serious about "empowering women", which they even made a major theme of their G20 presidency, 2020 ended with Saudi women still heavily restricted by the male guardianship system, which treats even adult women as minors and lets male family members take key decisions in their lives.

Women still cannot freely take decisions about their education, employment, health or who they want to marry. In addition, Saudi women cannot pass their nationality on to their children and, in the absence of laws to protect women from domestic violence, many remain trapped in abusive relationships.

Limited reform of the kafala system

In October 2020, the Saudi authorities announced reforms to the kafala (sponsorship) system, to take effect from March 2021. They aim to ease some of the heavily criticised restrictions on foreign workers by allowing them to change jobs after their contract ends, or within a notice period, and allowing them to apply for an exit permit to leave the country without obtaining their employer's (or sponsor's) consent. Yet since the reforms have not yet been published in detail, it is hard to assess how much difference they will make in practice. Furthermore, various categories of worker are not covered, including millions of domestic workers.

Domestic workers are arguably the most vulnerable category of migrant workers. 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.

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Migrant workers

In Saudi Arabia migrant workers make up roughly one-third of the country's inhabitants, approximately 10 million out of an estimated 34 million people, according to Saudi Arabia's General Authority for Statistics. Of these, 75% come from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Egypt and the Philippines. They face multiple problems due to a number of complex and thorny regulations in the Labour Law and private sector regulations. The kafala system under which foreign workers are employed in Saudi Arabia ties the worker to an individual resident who acts as his or her sponsor. This makes the worker vulnerable to exploitation, as the sponsor can change the nature of the employment and sometimes transfer the sponsorship against the employee's will. The sponsor can also terminate the employment and expel the worker from the country without notice, while the worker cannot leave Saudi Arabia without an exit visa. Workers who abscond due to ill-treatment and unbearable working conditions end up working in the black market and risk further exploitation.

9 The War in Yemen

In 2020 the conflict in Yemen entered its sixth year. Despite Saudi Arabia's announcement of a temporary ceasefire in April, the fighting continued on many sides, including continued air strikes by the Saudi-led coalition.

On 10 April 2020, the first COVID-19 case was confirmed in Yemen. Although the official number of COVID-19 infections has remained low, it is widely believed the actual number is much higher, with Yemen's health sector decimated by the war.

Continued fighting and ongoing humanitarian crisis

Since March 2015, Saudi Arabia has been supporting the official Yemeni government in an international military operation against Houthi forces who took control of the capital, Sana'a, in 2014. In April 2020, in light of the looming threat of the spread of COVID-19, Riyadh announced a temporary cessation of hostilities. However, this was not followed by an end to hostilities; the fighting continued on many sides, including ongoing military air raids by the Saudi-led coalition. According to the Yemen Data Project, the cumulative number of air raids since the start of the war reached over 22,000 in 2020, with over 18,000 civilians killed or injured in direct attacks.

The Yemen conflict continued to take a terrible toll on the civilian population in 2020. Over 24 million people – some 80 per cent of the population – are now in need of humanitarian assistance, including more than 12 million children. Approximately 17 million people are in desperate need of food, and the country is witnessing the worst cholera outbreak in modern history. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has put the total number of estimated deaths caused by the war at 233,000, including 131,000 from indirect causes such as lack of food, health services and infrastructure.

International donors continued to pledge billions of dollars in aid. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have hypocritically made large contributions to these funds, and a high-level pledging event held in Riyadh in June 2020 saw donors pledge a further $1.35 billion. Yet while Saudi Arabia and the UAE claim to be feeding Yemen in this way, they are in fact destroying Yemen's economy and the infrastructure that would allow the country to feed itself.

Impact of COVID-19 and destruction of Yemen's health system

The first COVID-19 case in the country was confirmed on 10 April 2020, and although the official number of COVID-19 infections has remained low, it is widely believed the actual number is much higher, while the availability of medical services in Yemen has been profoundly affected by the war. More than half of the country's health facilities have been destroyed or damaged in the conflict. Saudi-led coalition forces have demolished and damaged hospitals, clinics, vaccination centres and other medical settings through aerial attacks, in total disregard for these structures' protected status.

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UN chief de-lists coalition from latest annual "list of shame"

In June 2020, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres released his annual Report on Children and Armed Conflict, which documents UN-verified violations against children in conflict zones. It held the Saudi-led coalition responsible for 222 child casualties and four attacks on schools and hospitals in Yemen the previous year, yet he removed it, for the first time since 2017, from his list of parties responsible for grave violations against children. The annual report does not subject those listed to any action, but rather shames parties to conflicts in the hope of pushing them to implement measures to protect children. This year's list included many of the parties to the conflict in Yemen, including the Houthis, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, pro-government militias, and UAE-backed Yemeni forces, but the coalition itself was listed among countries that have put in place "measures to improve child protection". Human rights groups denounced this assessment.

Western governments continued to sell arms to the coalition

Saudi Arabia and its coalition allies continued to receive military assistance and equipment from Western governments in 2020. Numerous companies from the United States and Europe supplied coalition members with arms, components and spare parts, maintenance, training and support services. The United States is by far the biggest supplier of arms to Saudi Arabia, but military goods from Europe also constitute a substantial part of the overall equipment available to coalition air forces. The United Kingdom, Germany, Spain, France and Italy account for the majority of arms delivered from Europe to members of the Saudi-led coalition.

President Trump, who has repeatedly deflected criticism of Saudi Arabia's leaders, vetoed several congressional resolutions in 2019 aimed at blocking weapon sales, and in December 2020, during the final weeks of his administration, $290m worth of arms were sold to Saudi Arabia.

In light of mounting political pressure, on 23 March 2020 the German Security Council decided to renew the suspension of export licences for arms sales to Saudi Arabia for a third time, until the end of September 2020. This meant that the German government would neither issue new export licences to Saudi Arabia nor deliver any arms to the kingdom based on existing licences. In December 2020, German media outlets reported that the government had decided to extend the ban on exporting arms to Saudi Arabia until the end of 2021, tightening it by revoking permits that were previously on hold, but making an exception for weapons produced jointly with other European countries.

10 G20 Fails to Deliver PR Coup for Riyadh

Public relations and the international reputation of the kingdom have become major preoccupations for the Saudi authorities, especially Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, and particularly since the shocking murder of Jamal Khashoggi. In an attempt to attract vital foreign investment for his flagship development programme, Vision 2030, and at the same time fend off mounting international political pressure, the crown prince seeks to project the image of a country boldly striving for reform. Last year's Saudi presidency of the Group of 20 (G20) should have been a golden opportunity for this branding exercise, but campaigning by human rights activists ensured that the kingdom instead received a lot of negative publicity in 2020 for its appalling rights record, and came under unprecedented international pressure to improve.

The authorities carried over their previous PR strategy into 2020: investing in prestigious international sporting events (known as "sportswashing" when the aim is to revamp a tarnished image); enacting cosmetic reforms likely to appeal to Western critics without radically changing the reality; and spending heavily on contracts with global PR firms.

Government human rights body hires PR help in Washington

Not only the Saudi government itself, but even its official human rights body has been investing in image management. In March 2020, Saudi Arabia's Human Rights Commission (HRC) hired a Washington-based public relations company, Qorvis Communications, to handle strategic communications, media training, editorial services and polling in the United States, in a year-long contract worth $684,000. The HRC, which operates as an arm of the Saudi authorities' propaganda machine, labours to give the impression that human rights issues are being seriously addressed in the kingdom, despite much evidence to the contrary. In June, ALQST published the letter it sent to the HRC and Qorvis Communications advising them that the best way to bolster the HRC's reputation would be for it to actually defend human rights, rather than defending the Saudi authorities.

"Sportswashing" – mixed success

The kingdom continued to stage high-profile international sports events in 2020, including the Dakar Rally (formerly known as the Paris-Dakar Rally), an annual off-road endurance rally organised by the French company Amaury Sport Organisation, which was held in Saudi Arabia from 5-17 January 2020. Several major sporting and entertainment events were postponed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, but some resumed later in the year, including the Ladies European Tour golf tournament from 12-19 November.

On the other hand, the kingdom failed in its bid to purchase a team in the prestigious English football Premier League. Saudi Arabia's sovereign wealth fund, the Public Investment Fund, which has more than $300bn in assets and is chaired and managed by Mohammed bin Salman, attempted to acquire Newcastle United Football Club, but after a long-drawn-out saga the bid was finally withdrawn in July 2020.

International action in the run-up to the G20 Riyadh summit

Saudi Arabia's hosting of the Group of 20 largest world economies was also part of its global PR offensive. In the months leading up to the G20 summit in November 2020, the kingdom aimed to maximise the opportunity to expand its influence and attract foreign investment. Instead, in the lead-up to the summit, which was held virtually in the end, international pressure on Saudi Arabia built up over its human rights abuses. ALQST ran a campaign in collaboration with partner NGOs that mobilised people to urge G20 participants and governments to place human rights at the centre of all G20 discussions, and in March 2020 ALQST joined more than 220 civil society organisations from around the world in calling for a boycott of the G20 civil society engagement process (C20).

The U20 (urban) summit of G20 city chiefs took place virtually on 2 October, coinciding with the second anniversary of the killing of Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, but in response to the NGOs' campaigning the mayors of London, Paris, New York and Los Angeles pulled out.

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A few days later, the European Parliament voted by an overwhelming majority to downgrade its attendance at the November G20 summit over human rights concerns and call for sanctions. A petition organised by ALQST and co-signed by 65 MEPs further underlined the point. Similarly, 45 members of the US Congress called on Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and the Trump administration to pull out of the G20 summit, and a motion in the UK Parliament also raised grave human right abuses in the context of the G20, conveying the message loud and clear that the Saudi authorities could no longer expect to carry on business as usual.

Pressure increased at the United Nations too, with a third joint statement on the human rights situation in Saudi Arabia, co-signed by 33 UN member states, demanding genuine and structural rights reform. Saudi Arabia also lost its bid for election to a further term on the UN Human Rights Council, indicating that the international community will no longer tolerate the kingdom's serious rights abuses.

Together these things demonstrate that large parts of the international community are not buying into the Saudi authorities' extensive PR efforts to whitewash their image. Instead, the world is becoming increasingly vocal about their various and grave human rights abuses, and demanding genuine reform and accountability.

11 Awards

In 2018 ALQST launched a campaign calling on partner NGOs, national governments and human rights supporters all over the world to celebrate Saudi Arabia's human rights heroes by nominating them for prizes and awards and getting them talked about in international forums. The success and value of this campaign in gaining recognition for Saudi activists and their causes can be seen in the many prizes they have won in recent years, including 2020.

In March 2020, the "Geuzenpenning" a prestigious Dutch human rights prize, was awarded to the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association (ACPRA) for its work defending human rights. The award was collected on ACPRA's behalf by ALQST founder Yahya Assiri, as most of its members were still, and remain, in Saudi prisons serving long sentences for their peaceful work.

Also in March 2020, ALQST announced that imprisoned human rights defenders Loujain al-Hathloul, Waleed Abu al-Khair and Naseema al-Sadah had been nominated for the 2020 Nobel Peace Prize for their years-long struggle for fundamental human rights in Saudi Arabia.

ACPRA

The Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association (ACPRA) was established in October 2009 to promote and protect fundamental rights and freedoms in Saudi Arabia. It was never legally recognised by the government, yet was only formally banned in 2013. All of its 11 members have been prosecuted and subjected to severe retaliation by the Saudi authorities for their human rights activism and cooperation with United Nations human rights mechanisms.

ACPRA was founded with the aim of promoting and safeguarding the fundamental human, civil and political rights of all Saudi citizens. It peacefully advocated for a constitutional monarchy, a universally elected parliament, an independent judiciary and the protection of fair trial rights in Saudi Arabia. ACPRA further documented cases of human rights violations within the kingdom, helped victims to file legal claims against the officials responsible, and communicated them to foreign NGOs and the relevant UN Special Procedures.

In June 2020, Loujain al-Hathloul was voted winner of the Freedom Prize 2020, an initiative of the Normandy Region in partnership with the International Institute for Human Rights and Peace.

In October 2020, ALQST itself was honoured to receive the 2020 William D. Zabel Human Rights Award for its work defending human rights in Saudi Arabia. The award from Human Rights First was presented at a virtual event on 21 October 2020.

This award sends a message that all the heroes who have courageously defended human rights in the country, for which they have often paid the highest price, have not been forgotten.

"By shining a light on ALQST in this way, Human Rights First is shining a light on the besieged human rights movement in Saudi Arabia," said ALQST founder Yahya Assiri. "This award sends a message that all the heroes who have courageously defended human rights in the country, for which they have often paid the highest price, have not been forgotten. We take this occasion to reiterate our call for their immediate and unconditional release."

In November 2020, Loujain al-Hathloul was awarded the 2020 Magnitsky Human Rights Award. Her award was presented by UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions Agnès Callamard, whose speech can be read here.

12 Conclusion and Recommendations

This report has shown how the Saudi authorities continued on their course of human rights violations in 2020, while their abysmal record drew increased international criticism. The authorities no doubt hoped to use their presidency of the G20 in 2020 to maximise the opportunities for positive PR, but instead significant international pressure was brought to bear in the lead-up to the G20 summit in November, including a letter from members of the US Congress, a resolution in the European Parliament, and the kingdom's failure to win re-election to a further term on the UN Human Rights Council.

In the face of such criticism, the Saudi authorities continued to announce cautious reforms, including in 2020 proposed reforms to the notorious kafala (sponsorship) system and the ending of Saudi judges' discretion to apply the death penalty to minors. 2020 also saw a fall in the number of executions carried out. However, the reforms announced, like those before them, including the lifting of some of the restrictions on women under the oppressive male guardianship system, proved on examination to contain significant loopholes, allowing systematic discrimination and grave violations to continue.

The authorities' rhetoric of reform appears to be heavily geared towards an international audience. The kafala announcement, for instance, was made just ahead of the G20 summit in November 2020. Following the summit, as attention veered away from Saudi Arabia, a new wave of violations took place, including several prisoners of conscience being sentenced to prison and a fresh upturn in executions. Some measures, including the softening of sentences against women activists whose cases generated

widespread international attention, appear to have been taken in light of the mounting pressure, and in anticipation of a new US administration that is likely to be more critical of Saudi Arabia's rulers.

This dynamic calls into question the Saudi authorities' genuine will to improve their record, but also highlights the importance of such international pressure, which, especially given the absence of civic space inside the country, does have an impact and can bring about positive change in the human rights situation on the ground. As such, it is vital that pressure on the Saudi authorities by the international community is maintained and increased, in order to secure improvements on the ground and ultimately the enduring reforms that are required. It is with this purpose in mind that we put forward the following recommendations:

Recommendations for the international community:

- Take action to ensure that an impartial, thorough, independent and effective criminal investigation is opened into the murder of Jamal Khashoggi, in which all perpetrators, including those at the head of the chain of command, are identified and prosecuted in a fair and transparent trial;
- Establish an immediate moratorium on all arms sales and exports of surveillance technology to Saudi Arabia;
- Consider the general human rights situation when engaging in business with the Saudi authorities, and assess the adverse human rights impact this might have;
- Introduce and endorse a UN resolution establishing a monitoring mechanism over the human rights situation in Saudi Arabia; and
- Urge the authorities in Saudi Arabia to implement the recommendations below.

Recommendations for the Saudi authorities:

- Ensure that the rights to freedom of expression, assembly and association are fully respected in law and practice and immediately and unconditionally release all prisoners of conscience, including women human rights defenders, 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;

- 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 counterterrorism;

- 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, holding perpetrators accountable and providing victims with effective remedy in line with international standards;

- Immediately abolish the male guardianship system, repealing laws and ending practices that discriminate against women;

- Establish a moratorium on use of the death penalty with the aim of working towards its abolition; in the mean time, amend all existing legislation to limit application of the death penalty to the most serious crimes and prohibit the execution of minors;

- Put an end to all violations of international humanitarian and human rights law in Yemen, and ensure rapid and unimpeded delivery of humanitarian relief and essential goods;
  Put an end to the practice of enforced disappearance and ratify the UN Convention on the Protection of all Persons from Enforced Disappearance;

- Improve the management and oversight of prison facilities and ensure that the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners are upheld in all places of detention;

- Abolish the kafala system and ratify the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families as well as the ILO Convention No. 189 on Domestic Workers;

- Put an end to the practice of unlawful demolitions and forced displacement, and conduct consultation with residents and provide adequate prior notice and sufficient compensation for losses;

- Facilitate the naturalisation of stateless individuals and ratify the 1954 Convention Relating to the Status of Stateless Persons as well as the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

13 Timeline of Human Rights-Related Events in 2020

2 January
Local authorities inform inhabitants of the villages of al-Khuraiba, Sharma and Gayal that they are to be compulsorily evicted, as the land is required for the Neom megacity project.

5-17 January
The Dakar Rally, an annual off-road endurance rally organised by the French company Amaury Sport Organisation, takes place in Saudi Arabia.

14 January
News confirms details of the detention of journalist and writer Maha al-Rafidi, arrested in September 2019.

9 January
Human rights activist Waleed Abu al-Khair is transferred to hospital following a deterioration in his health while on hunger strike over ill-treatment in prison.

21 January
ALQST launches its new "Prisoners of Conscience" webpage, which presents profiles of scores of prisoners of conscience arbitrarily detained in Saudi Arabia.

22 January
UN experts call for an investigation into allegations that the Saudi Crown Prince was involved in hacking the phone of Washington Post owner and Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos.

3 February
Detained human rights activist Mohamed al-Otaibi appears before the SCC for the latest session of his trial.

30 January
The Criminal Court holds a new session in the trial of women human rights defenders, with Loujain al-Hathloul and Mayaa al-Zahrani appearing in court.

3 February
A new session is held at the SCC in the trial of Saudi-US doctor Walid Fitaihi.

6 February
Human rights activist Waleed Abu al-Khair announces the ending of his hunger strike, after nearly two months, following his transferral from high security detention back to his previous prison accommodation.

11 February
Human rights activist Khaled al-Omair announces the suspension of his hunger strike after the Public Prosecutor's Office informs him that State Security has handed his case over to it.

12 February
Women human rights defenders Loujain al-Hathloul and Mayaa al-Zahrani appear before the Criminal Court, where the public prosecutor responds to their defence, repeating previous charges.

12 February
Teenager Murtaja Qureiris has the 12-year sentence passed on him in June 2019 reduced to eight years.

12 February
There is news that disappeared humanitarian worker Abdulrahman al-Sadhan has been allowed to call his family for the first time since he was forcibly disappeared in March 2018.

12 February
A new session is held in the trial of al-Abbas Hasan al-Maliki, son of Islamic scholar Hassan Farhan al-Maliki.

19 February
A session of the women human rights defenders' trial is held in the Criminal Court, which Naseema al-Sadah, Nouf Abdelaziz, and Samar Badawi are expected to attend.

2 March
Imprisoned human rights defender Mohammed al-Qahtani has contact with his family again following a recent cut in communication, which resulted from his transferral from one building to another.

28 February
The UN women's rights committee urges Saudi Arabia to release human rights defender Loujain al-Hathloul from prolonged pre-trial detention and ensure her right to a fair trial.

4 March
The UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention calls, in an Opinion, on the Saudi authorities to immediately release human rights defenders Essa al-Nukhaifi, Abdulaziz al-Shubaily and Issa al-Hamid.

4 March
ALQST, along with FIDH and Right Livelihood Foundation, holds a side event at the 43rd session of the UN Human Rights Council: "Saudi Arabia: Cosmetic reforms and PR offensive to whitewash human rights abuses".

8 March
Sixty-eight Palestinians and Jordanians are brought before the SCC for the first session of their trial since they were arbitrarily arrested and detained in early 2019.

6 March
Poets Musleh bin Ayead and Munif al-Mangara confirm news of the release of three Saudi poets: Abdullah bin Atqan, Sultan al-Jalawi al-Shaibani and Mohamed bin Eid al-Huwaiti.

8 March
Islamic scholar Hassan al-Maliki attends a session of his trial at the SCC, in which he responds to the charges against him. This marks his first court appearance since he received the charges in September 2018.

13 March
The "Geuzenpenning", a prestigious Dutch human rights prize, is awarded to the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association (ACPRA) at a ceremony in the Netherlands. The award is received on their behalf by ALQST founder Yahya Assiri.

15 March
Saudi Arabia's Supreme Judicial Council postpones court hearings until further notice in light of the COVID-19 outbreak.

15 March
A government news agency announces the arrest of 298 government officials.

19 March
ALQST urges the Saudi authorities to take measures to combat the spread of highly infectious diseases in prisons, including but not limited to the COVID-19 virus.

20 March
ALQST announces that imprisoned human rights defenders Loujain al-Hathloul, Waleed Abu al-Khair and Naseema al-Sadah have been nominated for the 2020 Nobel Peace Prize.

28 March
Ruling family member Salman Al Saud is taken by masked men from the villa where he is being held in detention and moved to an unknown location, to be forcibly disappeared again for a further two months before being returned to his father under house arrest at the end of May.

23 March
Germany's Security Council votes to renew an arms embargo on Saudi Arabia.

31 March
The Saudi authorities arrest well-known social media personalities who have commented on the spread of the coronavirus, as well as other public figures.

March
The authorities send in Special Forces to raid the homes of inhabitants resisting eviction to make way for the Neom megacity project, and arrest at least twenty individuals.

13 April
Special Forces attack the home of Abdul Rahim al-Huwaiti with heavy weapons, killing him.

9 April
Human rights defender Abdullah al-Hamid suffers a stroke and is transferred in critical condition to intensive care at a hospital in Riyadh.

16 April
It is revealed that Basma bint Saud Al Saud, a daughter of the former King Saud, is being held in prison.

23 April
Abdullah al-Hamid dies as a result of repeated ill-treatment and denial of medical treatment by the Saudi authorities.

Late April
Saudi authorities attempt to cover up their killing of Abdul Rahim al-Huwaiti, by bribing members of his tribe to disown him and "renew allegiance" to the kingdom's rulers.

28 April
The governmental Saudi Human Rights Commission announces that a decree has been issued by King Salman that would end Saudi judges' discretion to apply the death penalty to minors.

Late April
The Saudi authorities carry out a spate of arrests of journalists and intellectuals for expressing sympathy over the death of reformer and rights activist Abdullah al-Hamid. Those arrested include journalist Aql al-Bahili, writer Abdulaziz al-Dukhail and activist Sultan al-Ajmi.

20 May
Journalist Saleh al-Shehi's family tweet news that he has been released from prison, but it is not known whether permanently or only temporarily, or whether charges have been dropped.

2 June
UN experts send a letter to Saudi Arabia expressing deep concern over the death in detention of leading human rights defender Abdullah al-Hamid and the continuing detention of women human rights defenders.

2 June
ALQST and 11 other NGOs sign an open letter calling on management consulting firms involved in Saudi Arabia's Neom project to condemn the associated human rights violations.

3 June
UN Special Rapporteur on human rights defenders Mary Lawlor calls on the Saudi authorities to release Saudi women human rights defenders, and for their whereabouts in prison to be revealed to their families.

5 June
The sister of detained journalist Marwan al-Muraisy passes away without him being able to see or phone her during her last illness.

15 June
The UN removes the Saudi-led coalition fighting in Yemen from an annual blacklist of parties violating children's rights.

11 June
A child is reportedly killed by bulldozers following demolitions in the governorate of Harajah.

19 June
ALQST launches a campaign, in the lead-up to the November G20 summit in Riyadh, calling for human rights to take centre stage in all G20 discussions.

19 July
Saudi journalist Saleh al-Shehi dies, just two months after his unexpected release from prison.

30 July
It is revealed that Saudi Arabia's bid to acquire Newcastle United Football Club has been withdrawn, following a long-drawn-out saga.

29 July
Game developer and esports tournament organiser Riot Games announces the cancellation of a sponsorship deal with Saudi Arabia's Neom megacity project that had been announced only the day before.

12 August
ALQST learns that the health of Dr Mohammed Saleh al-Khudari, suffering from a herniated disc, has deteriorated in prison.

17 August
ALQST has news that Hezam al-Ahmari, an employee at Jeddah seaport, was arrested by the Saudi authorities in February 2020 for filming a video. He is being charged with "inciting public opinion".

17 August
Loujain al-Hathloul goes on hunger strike until 23 August in protest over having been denied visits and phone calls for nearly three months.

17 August
Nineteen organisations across the United States and Europe urge World Trade Organisation member states to reject Saudi Arabia's nominee for the position of WTO Director-General.

21 August
MENA Rights Group and ALQST submit a complaint on behalf of ruling family member Salman bin Abdulaziz bin Salman bin Mohammed Al Saud and his father Abdulaziz Al Saud to the Special Procedures of the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva.

27 August
The Saudi Public Prosecutor orders the review of death sentences for Ali al-Nimr, Dawoud al-Marhoun and Abdullah al-Zaher for acts committed when they were minors.

31 August
Loujain al-Hathloul is allowed a visit from her family, after being denied any visits or phone calls for almost three months.

31 August
ALQST receives news that Abdullah Ibrahim al-Sayel, a student at King Khalid University, was arrested by Saudi officials in September 2019 following a raid on his home in Muhayil, Asir. The arrest is linked to his activity on Twitter and support for prisoners of conscience.

2 September

ALQST holds a virtual workshop bringing together Saudi activists and Members of the European Parliament to discuss issues of women's and human rights in Saudi Arabia ahead of the November G20 summit.

3 September

ALQST learns that the Saudi authorities are stopping activist Abdulaziz al-Sunaidi – detained since 2015, and jailed for eight years for tweeting about human rights – receiving visits or phone calls, repeatedly placing him in isolation, and threatening and psychologically torturing him.

7 September

The Criminal Court in Riyadh commutes five death sentences to long prison terms in the trial for journalist Jamal Khashoggi's murder.

3 September

The Specialised Criminal Court issues prison sentences against Abdullah al-Maliki (seven years), Ibrahim al-Harthi (five years), Ahmad al-Sawian (three years), Yousef al-Qassim (five years), Khaled al-Ojaimi (three years and eight months) and Fahad al-Sunaidi (three and a half years), on charges relating to free speech.

15 September

Denmark delivers a cross-regional joint statement at the UN Human Rights Council on behalf of 33 States, raising their concerns over the human rights situation in Saudi Arabia.

23 September

ALQST holds a conference on Saudi National Day, bringing together young Saudi activists to talk about human rights and inspiring pioneers of human rights activism in the kingdom.

30 September

The mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, joins the mayors of New York, Los Angeles and Paris in refusing to attend or send a representative to a summit of city leaders (U20) hosted by Saudi Arabia as part of its presidency of the G20.

25 September

A new report by the UN Secretary-General records "multiple allegations" of arbitrary detention, ill-treatment, torture and harassment by the Saudi authorities targeting individuals for cooperating, or seeking to cooperate, with the United Nations.

30 September

Thirteen activists and writers, arrested in April 2019, appear before the SCC for the first hearing of their trial since being detained.

3 October

Prison sentences are issued against three detainees held arbitrarily since September 2017: Nayef al-Sahafi (10 years), Mosad al-Kathiri (three and a half years), and Ali Badahdah (six years).

8 October

The European Parliament passes a resolution condemning human rights abuses in Saudi Arabia and urging the European Union to take measures including downgrading its representation at the upcoming G20 summit hosted by Riyadh.

6 October

Businessman and economist Essam al-Zamel is sentenced to 15 years in prison.

13 October
Saudi Arabia fails to win election to a further term on the UN Human Rights Council.

16 October
An Early Day Motion is tabled in the UK parliament calling on the government to urge Saudi Arabia to take concrete steps to improve its human rights record in the lead-up to the G20 summit.

19 October
Sixty-five MEPs sign ALQST's petition calling on EU representatives to re-evaluate participation in the upcoming G20 summit.

18 October
The Specialised Criminal Court again postpones the trial of Islamic scholar Salman al-Odah.

21 October
ALQST receives Human Rights First's 2020 William D. Zabel Human Rights Award for its work defending human rights in Saudi Arabia.

26 October
The UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) raises the alarm over Loujain al-Hathloul's health following her latest hunger strike.

16 November
Loujain al-Hathloul is awarded the 2020 Magnitsky Human Rights Award.

6 November
Women members of the Irish parliament call on their government to call in the Saudi ambassador in Dublin over Loujain al-Hathloul's treatment in prison.

17 November
Khaled al-Odah is sentenced to five years in prison to be followed by a five-year travel ban.

18 November
The German parliamentary committee on human rights adopts a statement expressing serious concerns about Saudi Arabia's human rights record ahead of the G20 Riyadh Summit.

24 November:
A Turkish court resumes the trial in absentia of 26 Saudi officials for the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi.

21-22 November
The G20 leaders' summit takes place virtually.

25 November
Women human rights defenders Loujain al-Hathloul, Nassima al-Sadah, Samar Badawi and Nouf Abdulaziz are brought before the Criminal Court in Riyadh.

28 November
Detained ruling family member Salman Al Saud and his father Abdulaziz Al Saud are taken to an unknown location, and have been missing since.

1 December
Human rights activist Mohamed al-Otaibi appears before the SCC for the next hearing in his new trial.

30 November
ALQST receives unconfirmed reports about the arrest of Minister of National Guard Abdullah bin Bandar.

2 December
ALQST receives a message from detained human rights activist Khaled al-Omair headlined "Save the Prisoners of Conscience".

6 December
Cleric Hashim al-Shakhs is arrested in a raid on his home in al-Ahsa, after his neighbourhood is cordoned off by security forces.

10 December
Loujain al-Hathloul's trial resumes, now in the SCC after being transferred from the regular Criminal Court, and the Public Prosecution presents an amended indictment against her.

8 December
Medical doctor and dual US-Saudi citizen Walid Fitaihi is sentenced by the SCC to six years in prison, on vague charges including "breaking allegiance with the ruler" and "sympathising with a terrorist organisation".

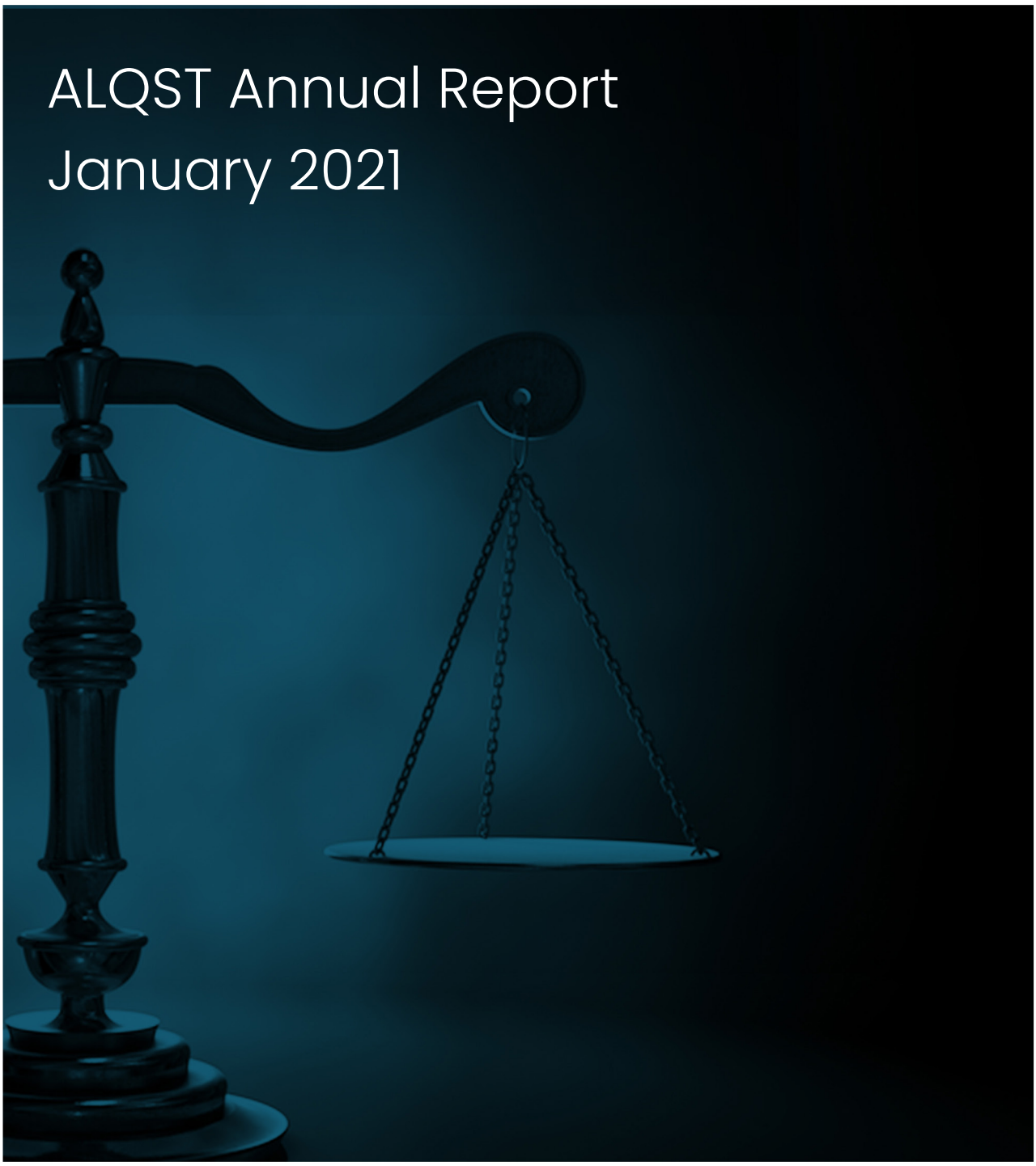
19 December
Human rights defender Mohammed al-Qahtani begins a hunger strike in al-Ha'ir Prison over being denied family contact, access to books and essential medication.

27 December
ALQST receives confirmation that writer Zakaria al-Safwan has been released from Qatif Prison having served the 10-year sentence handed to him by the SCC. He was arrested for an article about the right to demonstrate in 2011.

31 December
Mohammed al-Qahtani ends his hunger strike after 12 days, as the authorities say they will meet his demands.

28 December
The SCC sentences human rights defenders Loujain al-Hathloul and Mayaa al-Zahrani to five years and eight months in prison, with 2 years and 10 months suspended.

ALQST
القسط
لدعم حقوق الانسان
Advocating for Human Rights

Abuses Under Scrutiny:

Human Rights in Saudi Arabia