



The Spotlight Fades, Repression Mounts Again:

Human Rights in Saudi
Arabia in 2021

ALQST Annual Report

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1. Executive Summary



The start of 2021 saw Saudi Arabia's leaders under intense international pressure to improve their dismal human rights record. Throughout the previous year, when Riyadh held the prestigious G20 presidency and hosted the annual G20 summit, ALQST, other NGOs and human rights supporters had helped to keep the spotlight firmly on the Saudi authorities' violations. The impending change of US administration – as Donald Trump, a staunch defender of the Saudi leadership, was succeeded as president by Joe Biden – added to this pressure, and coincided with some announced reforms and concessions.

But as the spotlight faded, and as President Biden's promise to "recalibrate" US-Saudi ties failed to drastically change relations – despite some symbolic measures early in the year – the Saudi authorities reverted to their habitual pattern of repression, with fresh waves of arbitrary arrests of writers, bloggers and peaceful critics, harsh sentencing of activists, and deliberate attempts to place the lives of prisoners of conscience at risk.

It is clear that only sustained international pressure on the Saudi authorities, led in name by King Salman but in reality by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, will ultimately lead to meaningful progress towards full respect for basic human rights and freedoms in Saudi Arabia.

ALQST's Annual Report on the human rights situation in Saudi Arabia in 2021 covers all of these developments in comprehensive detail, and offers many links to further information from ALQST's resources.

The absence of fundamental laws creates a **legal vacuum** in Saudi Arabia but, on 8 February 2021, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman [announced](#) that by the end of the year the authorities would adopt new laws and revise existing ones to “reform the kingdom’s judicial institutions”. The announcement heralded the kingdom’s first codified Personal Status (or Family) Law, a Civil Transactions Law, a Penal Code of Discretionary Sanctions, and a Law of Evidence. However, no further details have yet been published.

The Saudi authorities claim that jurisdiction in the kingdom is based on Sharia law as interpreted by the Council of Senior Scholars, the kingdom’s highest religious authority. The country has no formal constitution, only a Basic Law of Governance that fails to embody fundamental rights and freedoms. Moreover, the kingdom does not have a criminal code but instead leaves legal interpretation to the discretion of judges, giving them enormous leeway to construe acts retroactively as crimes.

Meanwhile, the legal vacuum in Saudi Arabia is being filled with pieces of exceptional legislation, such as the Counter-Terrorism and Anti-Cybercrime Laws, which can be loosely interpreted to include a wide spectrum of offences.

In 2021, the Saudi authorities again made many **arbitrary arrests** of people peacefully exercising their right to freedom of expression and other fundamental rights. With so many prominent figures already behind bars, this year’s arrests tended to target younger and lesser known individuals including young activists and bloggers, as well as family members of those already detained. News also continued to emerge of individuals arrested in previous years, who have included writers and academics, religious figures, human rights defenders, and even government officials and members of the ruling family. Many of them are still in detention without charge or serving prison sentences after unfair trials. 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.

Dozens of prisoners of conscience were released in 2021 – often as a result of significant international pressure – either provisionally or after completing prison sentences, but even then only on stringent conditions that usually included arbitrary bans on travel, work and social media activity. Those **conditionally released** this year included five more **women human rights defenders** (WHRDs); 13 activists released having been detained since April 2019; two young men previously sentenced to death; and three released without charge after months in detention. All remained under heavy restrictions following their release, including ongoing trials on charges relating to their peaceful activism; strict probation conditions that make them vulnerable to re-arrest; and lengthy travel bans that sometimes also apply to members of their families.

The murder in jail of Musa al-Qarni in October 2021, and an attempt on the life of jailed human rights defender Khaled al-Omair, drew attention once again to the **vulnerability of Saudi prisoners of conscience**. Conditions in Saudi prisons are generally poor, with overcrowding and low standards of hygiene still common, and COVID-19 mitigation lax. Prisoners of conscience, however – those jailed or arbitrarily detained for their human rights activism, advocacy for reform, or voicing of unacceptable political or religious opinions – also often face cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment behind bars for which they have no access to legal recourse. **Deliberate medical and administrative neglect, motivated by vindictiveness**, has led to a number of deaths in detention in recent years, such as that of iconic human rights defender Abdullah al-Hamid in April 2020; and in 2021 the authorities stepped up this approach by deliberately placing a number of individual prisoners' lives at risk. The **enforced disappearance** of many newly arrested individuals adds to fears for their safety.

Following a lull in judicial proceedings during much of 2020 in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, 2021 once again saw many detainees and prisoners of conscience brought to court to face **unfair trials**. Judicial proceedings in Saudi Arabia routinely fall short of international standards and fair trial guarantees. Common violations include the denial of access to lawyers and court documents, undue delays, and the holding of trials behind closed doors. Both the regular criminal courts and the Specialised Criminal Court (SCC), an exceptional jurisdiction set up in 2008 to try cases of terrorism, are notorious for their disregard of legal safeguards. In 2021, **lengthy prison sentences** were again handed down to numerous activists and peaceful critics for exercising their basic rights, including a 20-year sentence for humanitarian worker Abdulrahman al-Sadhan. Others had their convictions upheld or sentences increased on appeal, including human rights defender Mohammed al-Otaibi, whose prison term was extended to 17 years in total. In one politically motivated trial, **dozens of Palestinians and Jordanians** resident in Saudi Arabia were handed prison sentences

ranging from six months to 22 years. Many more trials are ongoing.

The Saudi state executed 67 individuals during 2021, more than twice as many as in 2020 but well below the figure for every other year since King Salman came to the throne in January 2015. For the first time in many years, no executions were carried out solely for drugs-related offences. Meanwhile, the execution of a man in June 2021 for offences apparently committed when he was only 17 years old cast doubt on the authorities' claim to have abolished the **death penalty for minors**. Dozens more detainees remain at risk of execution.

The authorities continued in 2021 to illegally expropriate land for development and force the **eviction of hundreds of residents**, including, in November, by demolishing a whole neighbourhood in Jeddah.

On 8 February 2021 Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman announced new laws to be adopted by the end of the year, including Saudi Arabia's first codified Personal Status (or Family) Law, but no further details materialised. Currently, in the **absence of a codified family law**, rulings on family issues are left entirely to the discretion of judges, who often discriminate harshly against women. And despite the authorities boasting of recent reforms in favour of women, 2021 ended with the oppressive **male guardianship system** still far from being dismantled and **women still subject to male control**.

In Saudi Arabia, **lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT)** people can face imprisonment, flogging and even execution for expressing their sexual orientation or gender identity. The kingdom has no written laws concerning LGBT rights, leaving matters to judges' individual discretion. In December 2021, Saudi Arabia rejected a UN General Assembly draft that called on states to act to eliminate discriminatory laws and practices, including those based on sexual orientation and gender identity. Global celebrities invited to the kingdom have begun speaking out about the lack of LGBT rights there; in December 2021, Formula 1 driver Lewis Hamilton said publicly that he did not feel comfortable competing in the Saudi Arabian Grand Prix in light of the oppression of the LGBT community.

Stateless persons in Saudi Arabia, known as "Bidoon" (meaning in Arabic "without", i.e. without nationality), continue to struggle and suffer hardship in every aspect of their lives, including education, health, work and family life. In November 2021, the Saudi authorities made moves towards the naturalisation of an unspecified number of foreign residents "with unique expertise", but this did not include any stateless persons, despite their far deeper ties to Saudi Arabia, the only country they have

known or lived in. The number of Bidoon in the kingdom is estimated at between 70,000 and 250,000.

Migrant workers, who make up roughly one-third of the population, continue to live a precarious existence. In March 2021, the Saudi authorities introduced limited reforms to the notorious **kafala (sponsorship) system**, under which foreigners working in the kingdom are dependent on an individual resident who acts as his or her sponsor. However, the *kafala* system has not been fully dismantled, and the new arrangements contain significant loopholes and exemptions, including not covering millions of domestic workers.

As the **conflict in Yemen** entered its seventh year, fighting continued with a large-scale military escalation in Ma'rib Governorate from February 2021. The warring parties continued to commit grave violations, including indiscriminate attacks on civilian areas by Houthi forces, and indiscriminate military air raids by the Saudi-led coalition. Shamefully, in October the UN Human Rights Council narrowly voted against renewing the only **international mechanism to investigate human rights abuses** in Yemen's conflict, following extensive lobbying by Saudi Arabia and other coalition partners. Western governments continued to supply arms to the coalition.

The year began with **significant international pressure** on Saudi Arabia to improve its appalling human rights record, following an increased international focus on the kingdom during its 2020 G20 presidency, and with the **new US administration** vowing to take a more critical stance toward Riyadh. While promises to drastically change US-Saudi relations failed to materialise, some positive steps were brought to bear on the Saudi authorities internationally, including a strong resolution from the **European Parliament** on human rights. July brought revelations of wide-scale phone hacking of civil society actors using the proprietary spyware known as **Pegasus**, leading to measures against its makers, the Israeli NSO Group. Meanwhile, the Saudi authorities carried over into 2021 their previous **intensive PR strategy** of investing heavily in international sporting and music events, to which at times there was some backlash.

ALQST's Annual Report for 2021 concludes with a comprehensive list of **recommendations** for the international community and the Saudi authorities, and a detailed **timeline of human rights-related events** in Saudi Arabia throughout the year.

2. Legal Framework



The absence of fundamental laws creates a legal vacuum

On 8 February 2021, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman [announced](#) that by the end of the year Saudi Arabia would adopt new laws and revise existing ones to “reform the kingdom’s judicial institutions”. The announcement heralded the country’s first codified Personal Status (or Family) Law (for more details see “women’s rights”, [page 53](#)), a Civil Transactions Law, a Penal Code of Discretionary Sanctions, and a Law of Evidence. However, no further details have yet been published.

The Saudi authorities claim that jurisdiction in the kingdom is based on Sharia (Islamic law) as interpreted by the Council of Senior Scholars, the kingdom’s highest religious authority. The country has no formal constitution, only a Basic Law of Governance that fails to embody fundamental rights and freedoms. Moreover, the kingdom does not have a criminal code but instead leaves legal interpretation to the discretion of judges. This means that the legal definition of crimes, as well as the determination and severity of punishments, rests on 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 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 2021, the Saudi authorities again made many arbitrary arrests of people peacefully exercising their right to freedom of expression and other fundamental rights. With so many prominent figures already behind bars, this year's arrests tended to target younger and lesser known individuals including young activists and bloggers, as well as family members of those already detained. News also continued to emerge of individuals arrested in previous years, who have included writers and academics, religious figures, human rights defenders, and even government officials and members of the ruling family. Many of them are still in detention without charge or serving prison sentences after unfair trials.

Arrests over freedom of expression

In 2021 the Saudi authorities continued to carry out arbitrary arrests of people exercising their right of free expression, including young activists, bloggers and others peacefully expressing their opinions online. In March, medical doctor **Loujain Daghestani** was arrested; she was released in June. A wave of further arrests of bloggers followed in May and June, including **Abdullah Gilan**, **Abdulrahman al-Sheikhi**, **Asma al-Subeaei**, **Lina Alsharif**, **Rina Abdulaziz** and **Yasmine al-Ghufaili**. ALQST also learned that another blogger, **Naza**, owner of the Twitter account @i_naza33, had been arrested in September 2020, and there had been no news of her since then.

These arrests appear to be linked to activity on Twitter, in which the individuals peacefully exercised their right to free speech.



Loujain Daghestani



Abdullah Gilan



Rina Abdulaziz

Meanwhile, it emerged that blogger **Dawood al-Ali**, owner of the Twitter account @dawood1972, had been arrested in December 2020, following tweets in which he criticised normalisation with Israel; he remains in detention without charge. A year later, on 24 December 2021, writer and researcher **Abdullah al-Yahya**, owner of the Twitter account @Dr_AbuMusa, was also arrested after publishing tweets criticising normalisation with Israel.

Some of those arrested were also forcibly disappeared. Following the [arrest](#) in May 2021 of Lina Alsharif, a 33-year-old Saudi doctor and blogger, her family were denied any contact with her for several weeks, during which she was held in conditions of enforced disappearance. Likewise, activist **Abdullah al-Mubarak** was [arrested](#) by the Saudi authorities on 22 July and forcibly disappeared. Al-Mubarak, 44, was arrested by officials believed to be from the Mabaheth (secret police), part of the Presidency of State Security, following a raid on his home in the city of Yanbu. After being arrested he was taken to an unknown location and denied any contact with his family for several months, before his case was brought to court. The reason for these measures is unknown but appears to be linked to his peaceful activism on social media, including calls for civil and political rights.



Abdullah al-Mubarak

Another wave of arrests took place on 8 July, in a series of raids in Abha City where the Saudi authorities arrested a number of academics including Sharia professor **Qassem al-Qathardi al-Alma'i**, Arabic professor **Mohammed al-Hazemi**, and **Ali bin Hassan al-Alma'i**.

In late October, academic **Saud al-Sarhan** was [detained and forcibly disappeared](#). The reasons for this are still not known; nor is it known where he is being held. Al-Sarhan had published an article on the future economic and political direction of Saudi Arabia under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, in which he acknowledged having previously harboured strong doubts. When the crown prince's former adviser Saud al-Qahtani re-emerged on the political scene in the autumn of 2021, the order went out for al-Sarhan's arrest.



Sometimes it takes weeks or even months for news of an arrest to surface, because victims are often subjected to periods of enforced disappearance, and because of the climate of fear that prevails in the country – friends and relatives are afraid to speak out.

ALQST learned, for example, in 2021 that ten Egyptian nationals belonging to Nubian community associations in Saudi Arabia had been [arrested](#) in July 2020 for exercising their right to free association and assembly. On 14 July 2020, Saudi officials believed to be from the Mabaheth (secret police), part of the Presidency of State Security, raided the home of **Adel Sayed Ibrahim Fakir**, the current head of the Nubian community in Riyadh and a long-term resident in Saudi Arabia. The following day they stormed the homes of the previous head of Riyadh's Nubian community, **Farajallah Ahmed Yousef**, and eight other members of Nubian civic associations in Saudi Arabia, and arrested them. For approximately two months after the arrests their whereabouts remained unknown. In September 2020 they were finally allowed to make calls to their families, in which they informed them that they were being held in Al-Ha'ir Prison in Riyadh. In May 2021 they were transferred from Al-Ha'ir to Abha Prison in Asir, before being returned to Al-Ha'ir in August, and transferred again to Abha in September. In their latest period in Al-Ha'ir, the ten individuals were finally charged, and they were brought to trial in November (for more details see "unfair trial proceedings", [page 44](#)).

Arrests of family members

The Saudi authorities' suppression of critical voices often extends beyond individuals themselves to targeting their family members with measures such as travel bans (for more details see "conditional releases", [page 26](#)) and arrests, a practice that continued in 2021. On 24 February, **Mohammed Baqir al-Nimr**, the father of **Ali al-Nimr**, a young man who was arrested as a minor, was himself arrested after Saudi security forces raided their home in Awamiyah. He was released two days later on 26 February.

Economist **Amer Matrook Alfaleh**, son of the writer and political scientist **Matrook Alfaleh**, was detained and [disappeared](#) by State Security on 21 November, without his family knowing where he was or why he had been arrested. He was released without explanation on 1 December.

Two sons of the preacher **Sulaiman al-Dowaish**, who has been forcibly disappeared since 2016 and was brutally [tortured](#) by high-ranking officials, were also both arrested in 2021 in reprisal for their relationship with and advocacy for their father. **Abdulwahhab al-Dowaish**, who was first [arrested](#) in 2017 and given a suspended prison sentence in September 2020, was re-arrested on 14 August 2021. He received a phone call from the Saudi authorities asking him to go to the Naif College for National Security in Riyadh, supposedly to have his electronic ankle tag removed. However, on arrival he was told he had to spend the remainder of his sentence, amounting to eight months, in prison. ALQST does not know where Abdulwahhab is currently being held, or whether his latest arrest was related to the earlier case or in reprisal for a report about al-Dowaish senior published in the *Wall Street Journal* in May 2021.



Mohammed Baqir al-Nimr

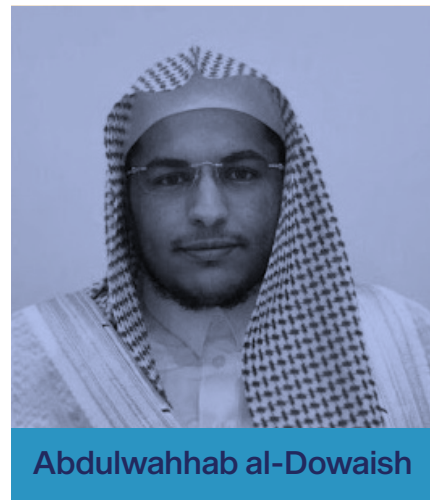


Amer Matrook Alfaleh



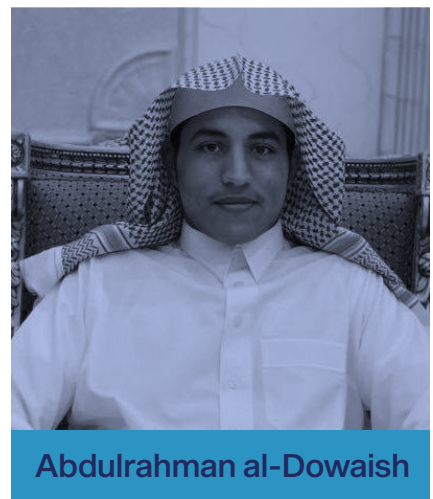
Sulaiman al-Dowaish

Abdulwahhab's original arrest in 2017 followed an argument with an official at the Interior Ministry to whom he had gone to seek the release of his father. In the course of the argument Abdulwahhab told the official: "We love our father dearly; either release him or put us in prison with him." The following day, a number of civilian cars surrounded Sulaiman al-Dowaish's family home, where all his children lived. Abdulwahhab was then arrested and forcibly disappeared for three months, after which his family were able to visit him in prison and could clearly see he had been tortured. A source told ALOST that Abdulwahhab was tortured for three months and forced to make confessions, and because he was in such poor physical condition he was moved to the prison hospital for treatment before being returned once again to the main prison.



Abdulwahhab was subsequently put on trial on charges including support for Islamic State (IS) and holding extremist ideas, although the Public Prosecution failed to produce any evidence for this. He was released before his trial began in March 2018, and was sentenced in September 2020 by the Specialised Criminal Court, Saudi Arabia's terrorism court, to three and a half years in prison with eighteen months suspension, to be followed by a travel ban of similar duration.

Not long after Abdulwahhab's re-arrest on 14 August 2021, his brother **Abdulrahman al-Dowaish** was [detained](#), on 18 October, for sending a text message to Badr al-Asaker, the director of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's private office, to enquire about his father Sulaiman al-Dowaish, whose fate and whereabouts are still unknown more than five years after his forcible disappearance. Al-Asaker then sent the order to the Public Prosecution for Abdulrahman's arrest. He was then forcibly disappeared, and on 5 November was put on trial behind closed doors without his family's knowledge and without his lawyer present. On 28 November he was transferred to Malaz Prison in Riyadh, following two weeks in intensive care after becoming ill in solitary confinement.



While in detention Abdulrahman was forced to sign a typed document in which he confessed under duress to a number of offences under the Anti-Cybercrime Law, including the preparation, storage and transmission by means of his mobile phone of material harmful to public order and privacy and defamatory of others. He was also made to confess to adopting an extremist ideology; attempting to damage community safety, the social fabric and public order by means of content sent from his mobile phone; and sending a message to someone via his mobile phone asking about his father and attaching tweets his father had posted insulting the country's ruler.

4. Prisoners and Detainees Released Under Continuing Restrictions



Dozens of prisoners of conscience were released in 2021 – often as a result of significant international pressure – either provisionally or after completing prison sentences, but even then only on stringent conditions that usually included arbitrary bans on travel, work and social media activity. Those conditionally released this year included five more women human rights defenders (WHRDs); 13 activists detained since April 2019; two young men previously sentenced to death; and three men released without charge after months in detention. All remained under heavy restrictions following their release, including ongoing trials on charges relating to their peaceful activism; strict probation conditions that make them vulnerable to re-arrest; and lengthy travel bans that sometimes also apply to members of their families.

Prisoners released on, or after, the expiry of their prison terms

2021 saw the release of five more of the 13 Saudi women human rights defenders (WHRDs) detained since 2018, after the expiry of their unjust prison sentences. They remain, however, under harsh restrictions and cannot be considered free.

On 10 February 2021, WHRD **Loujain al-Hathloul** was [conditionally released](#) by the Saudi authorities after two years and nine months in detention. This followed the unpublicised conditional releases earlier in the year of WHRD and blogger **Nouf**

Abdelaziz and WHRD **Mayaa al-Zahrani**, who had also served more than two and a half years in prison. Later, on 26 June 2021, WHRDs **Samar Badawi** and **Nassima al-Sadah** were released following the expiry of similar sentences.



Nassima al-Sadah



Samar Badawi



Loujain al-Hathloul

Al-Hathloul had been sentenced by the Specialised Criminal Court (SCC), Saudi Arabia's terrorism tribunal, to five years and eight months in prison, half of it suspended. Badawi and al-Sadah were sentenced by the Criminal Court in Riyadh, also to five years and eight months in prison, half of it suspended. All had been subjected to grossly unfair trials on charges based solely on their peaceful activism.

Their releases followed mounting international pressure. However, although their sentences were partially suspended, they also imposed heavy restrictions upon their release. Al-Hathloul's sentence, for example, included three years of probation after her release from jail, which means that she remains constantly vulnerable to re-arrest, and a five-year travel ban. Members of her family are also banned from travelling abroad (for more details see "travel bans", [page 26](#)).

Meanwhile, eight other WHRDs provisionally released since 2019 continued to face unfair trials. Some have now been sentenced to prison terms ranging from two and a half years to five years and eight months, again on charges relating to their peaceful activism.

The authorities' crackdown on women human rights defenders

On 15 May 2018, the Saudi authorities launched a ferocious campaign of arrests of women human rights defenders (WHRDs) as well as several men who advocated for women's rights. This was the first time the authorities had targeted women activists en masse. They arbitrarily detained 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 between May and July 2018 targeted 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.

In the months following their arrests, ALQST was informed that many of the WHRDs had undergone torture, sexual harassment and other forms of ill-treatment during interrogation, including being stripped naked, groped, beaten and subjected to electric shocks. The authorities also 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 adviser 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 agencies, and led a smear campaign in state media portraying them as traitors, but in the event 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, eight of the women – 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 in 2019, but continue to live under heavy restrictions. The remaining five were released, also remaining subject to severe restrictions, in 2021.

Meanwhile, other prisoners of conscience released in 2021 on the expiry of their sentences also continue to face heavy restrictions, notably travel bans.

On 14 January 2021, the six-year sentence passed on medical doctor **Walid Fitaihi** on 8 December 2020 was reduced to three years and two months with half of it suspended and a travel ban of similar duration. Given the time he had spent in detention since his arrest in November 2017, it meant he did not have to serve any more time in prison.



In late January 2021, human rights defender **Essam Koshak** was released after serving a four-year sentence on charges including “inciting public opinion”. The sentence, handed down by the Specialised Criminal Court (SCC) on 28 February 2018, included a further four-year travel ban from the time of his release.



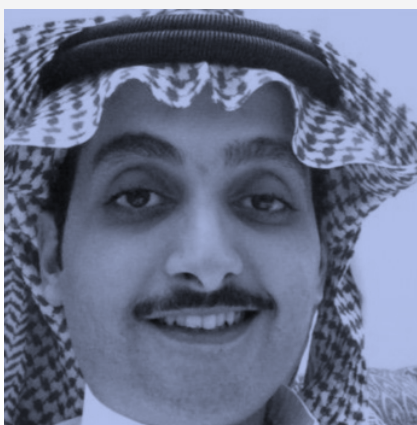
In late February 2021, journalist **Alaa Brinji** was released after serving a seven-year prison term for expressing his opinion and advocating for human rights. His sentence included an eight-year travel ban to follow his release. The charges against Brinji were based on Twitter posts in which he backed the right of women in Saudi Arabia to drive, and supported human rights defenders and prisoners of conscience.

Between February and March 2021, 13 other prisoners of conscience – activists and writers who had been detained in April 2019 – were conditionally released after serving prison sentences on charges relating to the peaceful expression of their opinions.

The Saudi authorities had arrested over a dozen bloggers, writers and family members of women human rights defenders between 4 and 9 April 2019. They included **Salah al-Haidar**, son of women's rights activist Aziza al-Yousef; writer and physician **Bader al-Ibrahim**; writers **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**; lawyer **Abdullah al-Shehri**; and doctor **Sheikha al-Urf** (who was released later in 2019).



Salah al-Haidar



Thumar al-Marzouqi



Abdullah al-Duhailan

After being held without charge for more than a year, and most of them being interrogated about their cultural activities, they were finally brought before the Specialised Criminal Court on 30 September 2020. They were later handed prison sentences, but given the time already spent in detention since their arrest, it meant they did not have to serve any more time. They were conditionally released in February and March 2021, but continue to face travel bans. Their sentences were upheld in January 2022.

In June, the *radood* (religious reciter) **Mohammed Bojbara**, detained since October 2020, was released by the Saudi authorities after serving a prison sentence for participating in and uploading a video of a Shia religious ceremony.

In late September, academic **Abdul Rahman al-Shumayri** was released from prison following the expiry of his 15-year sentence. Al-Shumayri, one of the “Jeddah Reformers”, was arrested in 2007 and tried on charges including “disobeying the ruler”. His prison term was to be followed by a 15-year travel ban.

The Jeddah Reformers

The story of the so-called “Jeddah Reformers” began with a raid by the Saudi authorities on a villa to the north of Jeddah on 2 February 2007, where they arrested six men who were discussing ideas for political and social reform. A further 10 activists were arrested subsequently in Jeddah and Medina. The group were accused of founding a secret organisation with the aim of spreading anarchy and seizing power with foreign help.

The 16 activists were remanded in custody without trial until February 2010. In November 2011 the court handed down harsh sentences on them, including a 30-year prison term for **Saud al-Hashimi**, the alleged leader of the group, to be followed by a 30-year ban on international travel.

In January 2012 the activists were offered bail and/or a ‘royal pardon’. Those who chose a royal pardon had to sign a letter apologising for their actions and pledging not to resume any activities that the authorities would deem provocative, or else the authorities would reactivate the charges against them.

Ten of the activists accepted, but six refused to sign, reasoning that this would be degrading and tantamount to admitting that they had committed a crime, while surrendering their freedom of expression.

The six who rejected the royal ‘pardon’ were Saud al-Hashimi, **Musa al-Qarni**, **Abdul Rahman al-Shumayri**, **Abdul Rahman Khan**, **Abdullah al-Rifa’i**, and **Sulaiman al-Rashudi**.

On 27 October and 14 November respectively, **Ali al-Nimr** and **Abdullah al-Zaher**, two young men detained since 2012 for participating in protests when children, were released after serving 10-year prison terms. Both had for years been under sentence of death until this was commuted in 2020 to a 10-year jail term. For both of them the sentence included a 10-year travel ban (for more details, see [page 50](#)).

Shamefully, prisoners of conscience are sometimes held beyond the expiry of their prison terms before eventually being released. They can be held for further periods before release in the Mohammed bin Nayef Counselling and Care Centre, where they are classified as “deviants” or “terrorists” and counselled accordingly. In late June 2021, the Saudi authorities moved several prisoners of conscience from their jails to the Centre in preparation for release, including **Saad Matar al-Otaibi**, **Bandar al-Shaalan**, **Abdullatif al-Hussain**, **Alabbas al-Maliki** and **Yasser al-Ayyaf**. In mid-August Alabbas al-Maliki, detained since October 2017, was released after serving a four-year prison sentence for “posting tweets sympathising with his father”. And in mid-September human rights activist Yasser al-Ayyaf, [detained](#) since July 2018, was released after serving a two-year prison sentence for his activism.



Saad Matar al-Otaibi



Alabbas al-Maliki



Yasser al-Ayyaf

Detainees released without charge

In early July 2021, three more prisoners of conscience were released after months in detention without charge. Writers **Abdulaziz al-Dukhail** and **Ali al-Shadwi** and journalist **Aqel al-Bahili** had been detained since April 2020 after expressing condolences, on social media, over the death in custody of human rights defender Abdullah al-Hamid.



Abdulaziz al-Dukhail

Travel bans on family members

As well as imposing travel bans on individuals released from prison, usually as part of the judicial sentence, the Saudi authorities continued in 2021 to impose arbitrary travel bans on family members of detainees, preventing them from leaving the country in a form of collective punishment. Such travel bans can be issued without due process, without specifying a reason, and without notifying those affected.

It took until December 2021 for the family of WHRD **Loujain al-Hathloul** to receive official confirmation of an arbitrary travel ban on them, and they have still not been given a specific reason. The ban, which appears to have been issued at the time of al-Hathloul's arrest and kidnapping from the United Arab Emirates in March 2018, includes her parents and siblings based in Saudi Arabia, but they only found out about it when attempting to travel outside the country.



Aqel al-Bahili

Similarly targeted are 19 members of the immediate family, including children, of cleric **Salman al-Odah**, detained since September 2017. The travel ban was issued at the time of al-Odah's arrest but they were not told why it had been imposed, and indeed only found out about it when several family members attempted to leave the country.



Salman al-Odah

5. Prisoners and Detainees at Risk



The murder in jail of Musa al-Qarni in October 2021 drew attention once again to the vulnerability of Saudi prisoners of conscience. Conditions in Saudi prisons are generally poor, with overcrowding and low standards of hygiene still common, and COVID-19 mitigation lax. Prisoners of conscience, however – those jailed or arbitrarily detained for their human rights activism, advocacy for reform, or voicing of unacceptable political or religious opinions – also often face cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment behind bars for which they have no access to legal recourse. Deliberate medical and administrative neglect, motivated by vindictiveness, has led to a number of deaths in detention in recent years, such as that of iconic human rights defender Abdullah al-Hamid in April 2020; and in 2021 the authorities stepped up this approach by deliberately placing a number of individual prisoners' lives at risk.

Murder and attempted murder

2021 saw a marked increase in the Saudi authorities' willingness to show reckless, if not deliberate and vindictive, disregard for the safety of certain prisoners of conscience against whom they appeared to be waging a campaign of vengeance, and whose lives they seemed purposely to place at risk. An extreme example of this pattern was the apparently contrived [murder](#) of political reformer **Musa al-Qarni** in October 2021.

Al-Qarni, one of the “Jeddah Reformers” arrested in 2007 (see [page 24](#)), was serving a 20-year sentence in Dhahban Prison near Jeddah, and had recently been moved to share a cell with *takfiri* extremists. A “takfiri” is someone who believes it lawful to kill any Muslim they consider guilty of apostasy. Al-Qarni repeatedly complained to the prison administration that these people’s hostility to his reformist views left him in a potentially dangerous situation, but was ignored.



On 12 October 2021, the human rights community was shocked to learn that al-Qarni had been brutally murdered in his prison cell. Witnesses reported that he was beaten around the head and face with sharp objects, causing facial injuries and fatal fractures to his skull. The evidence also suggests that more than nine hours passed after the crime occurred before the Dhahban prison administration took any action or notified the Public Prosecution. The killer informed the prison administration, or the guard on duty, at 2 a.m. that there was a dead body in the cell, but no response was made until 11 a.m.

Al-Qarni had previously reported receiving death threats in prison. He had already been subjected to beatings and torture while in jail and, when he suffered a stroke in May 2018, the prison administration gave him the wrong medication before transferring him to a psychiatric hospital, with the aim of damaging his intellectual reputation and giving the impression that he was mentally ill. He even wrote many times to King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman complaining about his ill-treatment, but never received any reply from the Royal Diwan; and the Public Prosecution, State Security and Saudi Human Rights Commission did not respond to complaints from al-Qarni either.

In a further show of contempt for Musa al-Qarni’s life, the Saudi authorities have so far [not concluded or reported any findings](#) from the widely called-for inquiry into his death. ALQST has therefore called for an urgent international, independent investigation into the circumstances of al-Qarni’s murder, including the Dhahban prison administration’s delay in notifying the Public Prosecution; the possibility that prison officials were complicit in the crime, and their failure to treat al-Qarni’s earlier complaints seriously; a review of the prison’s security camera records and the taking of witness statements from both inmates and prison staff; and a review of all the complaints al-Qarni had previously filed with the Royal Diwan and other bodies.

Musa al-Qarni (1954-2021)

Al-Qarni, born in 1954 in Saudi Arabia's Jizan Province, was a dissident academic and advocate for political and social reform. He began his university studies at the College of Sharia in Riyadh and went on to obtain a doctorate in *usul al-fiqh* (principles of Islamic jurisprudence) from Umm Al-Qura University in Mecca. He taught at several universities, including the Imam Mohammad Ibn Saud Islamic University in Saudi Arabia and the University of Da'wa and Jihad in Pakistan.

On 2 February 2007, al-Qarni was arrested among a group of academics and clerics known as "the Jeddah Reformers", who were interested in political and social reform in the Saudi kingdom. However, they were accused of founding a secret organisation with the aim of spreading anarchy and seizing power with foreign help, and in November 2011 were given lengthy prison terms. Al-Qarni was sentenced to 20 years in prison to be followed by a travel ban of similar duration.

There is grave concern for the safety of other prisoners of conscience whom the authorities may already be intending to expose in the same way to mortal danger, by vindictively and recklessly placing them in cells alongside ideological extremists. In late 2021 ALQST learned that Islamic scholar **Ibrahim Mohammed Ha'il al-Yamani** had also been [moved](#) to a cell with four *takfiris* who had threatened several times to kill him.

Al-Yamani was arrested in September 2017, during the same wave of arrests that swept up prominent cleric Salman al-Odah, Islamic scholar Hassan Farhan al-Maliki and dozens of others. Al-Yamani has already warned the prison administration of the threat he is under and the danger to his life, but the prison administration have ignored this complaint. Al-Yamani has previously suffered medical neglect in prison, and his health has suffered greatly as a result. In another act of vindictiveness, in 2020 the authorities prevented him from attending his father's funeral.



Ibrahim al-Yamani

ALQST learned in mid-2021 of another disturbing incident involving a prisoner of conscience: an [attempt to kill](#) human rights defender **Khaled al-Omair** in Al-Ha'ir Prison near Riyadh, where he is serving a seven-year prison sentence for his peaceful activism. Reports say an attempt was made to kill al-Omair by another prisoner whom he had never seen before, and has not seen again since the murder attempt, which took place on 30 July 2021 at 1:30pm local time.



Khaled al-Omair

Given that Al-Ha'ir Prison has surveillance cameras, the authorities responsible should be able to discover what happened – as in the case, too, of Musa al-Qarni's murder in Dhahban Prison. However, no investigation has been made into the incident involving al-Omair, and meanwhile al-Omair's health has been getting worse as a result of deliberate medical neglect on the part of the authorities. He is having increasing breathing difficulties, among other ailments.

Shrouded in Secrecy: Prisons and Detention Centres in Saudi Arabia

In July 2021, ALQST published a report entitled [Shrouded in Secrecy: Prisons and Detention Centres in Saudi Arabia](#), highlighting the chronically poor conditions in Saudi prisons, detention centres and deportation centres, which are characterised by overcrowding, poor hygiene and sanitation, and medical and administrative neglect.

The administrative and control structure of the Saudi prison system broadly consists of general prisons and detention centres under the Ministry of Interior; Mabath (intelligence services) prisons and secret detention facilities under the Presidency of State Security; and juvenile care/detention centres under the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development. Outside this structure, in addition, the authorities make use of unofficial places of detention where some of the worst human rights violations take place in even greater secrecy.

The absence of transparency and independent monitoring of the Saudi prison system contributes to the potential for serious violations of prisoners' rights, including unlawful arrest and detention; prolonged pre-trial detention; systematic use of torture during interrogation; medical neglect and malpractice; and failure to observe guarantees of due process.

COVID-19 and medical neglect

The COVID-19 pandemic has also highlighted the vulnerability of detainees in Saudi prisons, where overcrowding and insanitary conditions put the health and safety of inmates at serious risk, yet the authorities have failed to take adequate measures in mitigation.

An extreme example of such medical negligence was seen in the [death](#) of detainee **Zaheer Ali Shareeda** on 8 May, after he contracted the virus. Shareeda, detained since 2017 for his writings, died in Al-Ha'ir Prison near Riyadh after contracting COVID-19 amid an outbreak in the prison in April 2021, during which he and others were held on the same wing as prisoners already infected with the virus. In a further act of medical negligence, Shareeda and others were given the COVID-19 vaccine while displaying symptoms of the virus, contrary to standard medical guidelines.

When Shareeda's health deteriorated he was transferred to hospital, where he remained for more than a month until his death. His family were not informed about his illness, having already been denied visits or communication with him since February 2021. The circumstances surrounding Shareeda's death remain unclear, and when the authorities unexpectedly telephoned his family and asked them to collect his body they gave no explanation. The family received his body the day after his death.

Another victim this year of deliberate medical neglect in the context of COVID-19 was veteran rights activist and prisoner of conscience **Mohammed al-Qahtani**. He too [caught](#) COVID-19 at the time of Shareeda's death amid the outbreak in Al-Ha'ir Prison, but the prison administration did not tell him. Al-Qahtani, a co-founder of the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association (ACPRA), is serving a 10-year prison sentence on charges relating to his peaceful human rights work. He has faced repeated harassment and ill-treatment in prison, including periods in solitary confinement and denial of family contact.

ACPRA

The Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association (ACPRA) was established in October 2009 with the aim of promoting and safeguarding the fundamental human, civil and political rights of all Saudi citizens. It peacefully advocated for a constitutional monarchy, a universally elected parliament, an independent judiciary and the protection of fair trial rights in Saudi Arabia. ACPRA also documented human rights violations within the kingdom, helped victims to file legal claims against the officials responsible, and shared the information with foreign NGOs and the relevant UN Special Procedures.

ACPRA was never legally recognised by the government, yet was only formally banned in 2013. All of its 11 members were prosecuted and severely punished by the Saudi authorities for their human rights activism and cooperation with United Nations human rights mechanisms.

The majority of ACPRA's founding members are still in prison serving lengthy sentences for their peaceful activism, as follows: **Issa al-Hamid** (11 years in prison, to be followed by an 11-year travel ban); **Abdulrahman al-Hamid** (nine years in prison and a nine-year travel ban); **Abdulkarim al-Khodr** (10 years in prison and a 10-year travel ban); **Mohammed al-Bajadi** (four years in prison with four years' suspension and a 10-year travel ban, and since May 2018 detained without charge as part of a crackdown on women's rights defenders); **Mohammed al-Qahtani** (10 years in prison and a 10-year travel ban); **Fawzan al-Harbi** (10 years in prison and a 10-year travel ban); and **Abdulaziz al-Shubaily** (eight years in prison and an eight-year travel and social media ban). ACPRA co-founder **Abdullah al-Hamid** died in prison in April 2020, aged 69, as a result of gross administrative and medical neglect.

III-treatment and harassment leading to hunger strikes

In 2021, as in previous years, the harassment and intimidation prisoners of conscience face in prison sometimes led them to stage individual or collective hunger strikes to demand their rights and seek improvements in conditions.

In March 2021, Zaheer Ali Shareeda, Mohammed al-Qahtani (both mentioned above) and more than 30 other prisoners of conscience in Al-Ha'ir Prison, including human rights activists **Fawzan al-Harbi**, **Essa al-Nukheifi**, **Fahad al-Araini** and writer **Mohammed al-Hudaif**, staged a hunger strike [in protest](#) against harassment that included being held alongside psychiatric detainees and denied family contact and access to books and newspapers. Fourteen prisoners also signed a letter announcing their intention to go on hunger strike at the end of Ramadan, in May, in protest against their prison sentences; in the event they did not do so due to the COVID-19 outbreak.



Fawzan al-Harbi



Essa al-Nukheifi



Mohammed al-Hudaif

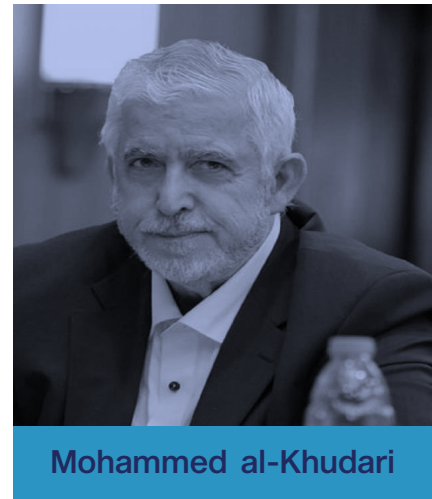
Despite such protests, the authorities have continued to place the lives of prisoners at risk. On 9 August 2021 Mohammed al-Qahtani began another hunger strike in protest at not being transferred out of the mental patients' ward, and at his continuing mistreatment. He suspended his strike on 12 August after the prison administration promised to look into his demands, but resumed it on 15 August when they failed to act to rectify his situation.

The dangers of housing prisoners alongside psychiatric detainees, for no reason other than reckless or even wilful disregard for their safety, were illustrated by an alarming incident in mid-2021 when one of the mentally ill prisoners started a fire. The prison administration managed to bring the fire under control, but it made conditions on the wing even worse.

Detained human rights defender **Waleed Abu al-Khair**, who is serving a 15-year prison sentence for his activism, also routinely faces various forms of ill-treatment in prison, including being held in solitary confinement, and has previously undertaken several hunger strikes.

Denial of medical treatment

There are currently several prisoners in Saudi jails whose lives are being unnecessarily endangered by the Saudi authorities through the deliberate denial of medical treatment. One critical case involves the retired doctor and former Palestinian official **Mohammed Saleh al-Khudari**, 84. He is being held in [life-threatening conditions](#) in Abha Prison, where the authorities are denying him essential medical treatment for cancer. Al-Khudari, who was undergoing post-operative cancer treatment at the time of his arbitrary arrest in



Mohammed al-Khudari

April 2019, has seen his condition severely worsen in detention. He has been denied urgent medical care for so long that his body would no longer respond to it, and he now needs more radical intervention in the form of chemo- or radiotherapy.

Al-Khudari also suffers from other untreated medical complaints including incontinence, which is preventing him from carrying out his ablutions in order to pray. He has also lost a dental bridge, which is affecting his speech and ability to eat. The courts had earlier agreed that in view of his deteriorating condition he could be released on medical grounds and placed under house arrest, but the State Security authorities did not implement the court order, and instead, on 8 August 2021, the Specialised Criminal Court handed al-Khudari a 15-year jail sentence, half of it suspended (see “unfair trial proceedings”, [page 44](#)).

There are also serious health concerns for many of the other Palestinians and Jordanians arbitrarily detained in Saudi Arabia since 2019. Mohammed al-Khudari’s son **Hani al-Khudari**, who is also in detention, has gallstones that urgently require surgery. Others are suffering from chronic conditions including hepatitis, diabetes, hypertension and arthritis, and are not receiving the healthcare they need.

Other detainees currently at risk include cleric **Salman al-Odah**, whose health has sharply declined in prison, including the loss of almost half of his ability to hear and see. Al-Odah has experienced severe ill-treatment in prison since his arbitrary arrest

in September 2017, including being denied medication for high blood pressure and high cholesterol.

The health of detained cleric **Mohammad al-Habib** has also been [deteriorating](#) in Dammam Prison, due to a lack of adequate health care for his sciatica and back and head pain that he suffers as a result of torture following his arrest in 2016. Al-Habib is currently serving two prison sentences totalling 12 years, on charges linked to his defence of the rights of Saudi Arabia's minority Shia community. He has been denied medical treatment by the prison authorities since May 2019, despite requiring pain relief for neuralgia resulting from torture he faced earlier in detention.

Deaths in detention

Two more unexplained deaths in 2021 add to the list of prisoners who have died in Saudi jails in recent years, either in suspicious circumstances or as a clear result of grave violations of their rights, including the systematic use of torture, chronically poor prison conditions, and administrative and medical neglect.

The most recent examples that have come to light include:

- *April 2020:* Pioneering human rights defender **Abdullah al-Hamid** died at the age of 69 while in detention, after the Saudi authorities repeatedly refused him urgently needed medical treatment. His health had deteriorated for several months as he was denied a vital surgical procedure for a heart condition.
- *July 2020:* Journalist **Saleh al-Shehi** died just two months after being unexpectedly released from prison. The authorities stated that he had died of COVID-19, but the circumstances of his death, as well as of his unexplained release, remain unclear.

- *May 2021:* Prisoner of conscience **Zaheer Ali Shareeda** died in mysterious circumstances. He and other prisoners had been given the COVID-19 vaccine while displaying symptoms of the virus, contrary to standard medical guidelines. When Shareeda's health deteriorated he was transferred to hospital, where he remained for more than a month until his death. His family were not informed about his illness
- *October 2021:* Reform advocate **Musa al-Qarni** was brutally murdered in Dhahban Prison, after being moved to share a cell with *takfiri* extremists, despite making repeated complaints to the prison administration that this put him in danger. An inquiry into the killing has not yet reported any findings

In the absence of effective investigations carried out by the Saudi authorities, there is an urgent need for international, independent investigations into these incidents, in order to bring those responsible to justice and prevent further such deaths occurring.

Physical torture

Although ALQST did not document any fresh cases of physical torture during 2021, torture has been practised systematically in Saudi Arabia in a climate of impunity for years, both to extract confessions during interrogation and as a form of punishment during detention. The continuing and almost routine use of enforced disappearance and incommunicado detention makes it more than likely that further instances of torture have occurred in secret.

Meanwhile, Saudi courts continued in 2021 to dismiss recent torture allegations, as in the case of woman human rights defender Loujain al-Hathloul. On 9 February 2021, on the basis of a flimsy enquiry, the Court of Appeal rejected al-Hathloul's claim that she had been tortured in jail. Although in the past 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.

News also continued to emerge in 2021 about previous torture cases. In March 2021, ALQST learned that human rights defender **Mohammed al-Rabiah** had earlier been subjected to [brutal torture](#) while in detention. Following his arrest on 15 May 2018, during a campaign of arrests of women human rights defenders as well as several men who advocated for women's rights, al-Rabiah, who suffers from a herniated disc, was tortured for months by electric shocks and waterboarding; held in a small wardrobe for several days, unable to sit or sleep; hung upside down by his feet; and beaten until unconscious.



Enforced disappearances

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, and is part of a larger pattern where arbitrary arrests are followed by shorter or longer periods of enforced disappearance before victims reappear to face trial. This means that most people who are arrested in Saudi Arabia endure periods of enforced disappearance, with their families having no knowledge of their fate or whereabouts. How long this situation lasts partly depends on whether 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.

Sometimes enforced disappearances continue for a very long time, raising even greater concerns for the safety and fate of the victims. [Examples](#) include preacher **Sulaiman al-Dowaish**, who was arrested on 22 April 2016, the morning after posting on Twitter comments critical of King Salman and Mohammed bin Salman, then Deputy Crown Prince. He was taken to a royal palace in Riyadh, where he was questioned by a high-ranking official about his Twitter posts 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. 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.

Sometimes limited information is revealed even after long periods of disappearance, only for the victims to be denied any further contact with the outside world. Recent examples include humanitarian worker **Abdulrahman al-Sadhan**, who was arrested by secret police in March 2018 from his workplace at the headquarters of the Saudi Red Crescent in Riyadh and forcibly disappeared for 23 months. Since a court appearance in August 2021, al-Sadhan has continued to be denied any contact with his family (see “unfair trial proceedings”, [page 41](#)).



Abdulrahman al-Sadhan

Similarly, journalist **Turki al-Jasser** was arrested on 15 March 2018 following a raid on his home. 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.



Turki al-Jasser

Out-of-favour members of the Al Saud ruling family have also been forcibly disappeared. In January 2018, **Salman Al Saud** was arrested, taken to Al-Ha'ir Prison and held incommunicado for seven months, without any news of his fate. 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. On 28 November 2020, Salman and his father were again moved to an unknown location and disappeared until late October 2021, when they were finally allowed family visits and phone calls.



Salman Al Saud

Basma bint Saud Al Saud, a daughter of the former King Saud, was arrested in March 2019, and was unable to contact her family until April 2019. It later emerged that she was being held in Al-Ha'ir political prison in Riyadh. From April 2020 she was denied any further contact with her family and was once again forcibly disappeared, along with her daughter Suhoud. During this time she was denied the medical care she needed for a potentially life-threatening condition, and fears grew for her health. However, in early January 2022 mother and daughter were finally released without charge.



Basma bint Saud Al Saud

6. Unfair Trials and Harsh Sentences



Following a lull in judicial proceedings during much of 2020 in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, 2021 once again saw detainees and prisoners of conscience brought to court to face unfair trials. Judicial proceedings in Saudi Arabia routinely fall short of international standards and fair trial guarantees. Common violations include the denial of access to lawyers and court documents, undue delays, and the holding of trials in secret. Both the regular criminal courts and the Specialised Criminal Court (SCC), an exceptional jurisdiction set up in 2008 to try cases of terrorism, are notorious for their disregard of legal safeguards. In 2021, lengthy prison terms were again handed down to numerous activists and peaceful critics for exercising their basic rights, including a 20-year sentence issued against humanitarian worker Abdulrahman al-Sadhan. Others had their convictions upheld or sentences increased on appeal, including human rights defender Mohammed al-Otaibi, whose prison term was increased to a total of 17 years.

Tsunami of jail sentences for activists and peaceful critics

Throughout 2021, rights activists and critics of the Saudi authorities were tried and jailed as part of a renewed crackdown on peaceful activism and the exercise of fundamental rights.

On 10 February, the Specialised Criminal Court (SCC) in Riyadh [sentenced](#) six activists to lengthy prison terms on charges relating to their peaceful civil activities. The SCC, whose remit is to handle terrorism cases, sentenced social rights activist

Israa al-Ghomgham to eight years, her husband **Mousa al-Hashim** to 17 years, **Ahmed al-Matrood** to 15 years, **Khaled al-Ghanim** to 13 years, **Ali al-Ouwaisher** to 10 years, and **Mujtaba al-Muzain** to eight years.

The Public Prosecutor had initially sought the death penalty for al-Ghomgham and four of the others, marking the first time that a woman in Saudi Arabia had faced the possibility of execution for her activism. Al-Ghomgham and her husband were arrested in December 2015 after they took part in peaceful protests in Qatif, in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province. After more than two years in pre-trial detention in the Mabaheth (intelligence service) prison in Dammam they were charged under Article 6 of the Anti-Cybercrime Law in connection with social media activity, as well as other alleged offences related to the protests.

In another extremely harsh case, on 5 April 2021 the SCC [sentenced](#) humanitarian worker and activist **Abdulrahman al-Sadhan** to 20 years in prison, to be followed by a travel ban of similar duration, on charges relating to his peaceful online activism. The sentence was [upheld](#) by the Court of Appeal in Riyadh on 5 October.

The Saudi authorities had arrested al-Sadhan on 12 March 2018 from his place of work at the Saudi Red Crescent headquarters in Riyadh without informing him of the reasons for his arrest or producing an arrest warrant. He was then taken away to an unknown location, and for nearly two years his family were left without any information as to his whereabouts or safety. After 23 months of enforced disappearance with no news as to his fate, he was allowed for the first time to have a phone call with his family. During the call al-Sadhan said he was being held in Al-Ha'ir Prison, but he gave no details of his state of health or general situation. After that phone call al-Sadhan was denied any further contact with his family for more than a year, until 22 February 2021.

Despite being told by the authorities in February 2021 that he was not facing charges and would soon be released, al-Sadhan was [brought to trial](#) before the SCC on 3 March 2021 on charges relating to his peaceful social media activism and relying on "confessions" extracted under torture. He was tried under the Counter-Terrorism and Anti-Cybercrime Laws on spurious charges that included "preparing, storing and sending material prejudicial to public order and religious values", based on peaceful tweets published on his Twitter accounts. The proceedings as a whole were marred by gross violations of international fair trial guarantees, including several hearings being held in secret.

On 8 April 2021 the SCC sentenced writer **Khaled al-Mahoush**, one of a host of academics, clerics, journalists and activists arrested in September 2017, to 10 years in prison to be followed by a travel ban of similar duration.

Many of those arrested in September 2017 faced months of detention without charge before some were eventually brought to trial on charges relating to free speech. Dozens were handed prison sentences in a series of court hearings in late 2020, and more were sentenced in 2021. Others are still being held in detention without charge or, like the popular cleric Salman al-Odah, having their trials endlessly postponed.



Khaled al-Mahoush

On 20 April 2021, the SCC [sentenced](#) human rights defender **Mohammed al-Rabiah** to six years in prison and a six-year travel ban on outrageous charges relating to his peaceful activism and defence of women's rights. They included "seeking to shake the social fabric or national cohesion", "instigating strife", "carrying out foreign agendas that disrupt the kingdom's security and stability", and "authorising and publishing a book containing suspicious trends". The SCC's verdict was upheld in September.

Al-Rabiah was arrested in 2018 as part of a crackdown on women's rights defenders and campaigners against Saudi Arabia's male guardianship system. Following his arrest he was subjected for months to brutal torture in detention (see [page 37](#)).

On 25 April 2021, human rights defender **Khaled al-Omair** was [sentenced](#) by the SCC to seven years in prison and a seven-year travel ban for alleged offences that included launching a hashtag on Twitter that read (in Arabic) "the people want a new constitution", and leading a campaign to incite the people against the country's leaders.

Al-Omair was arrested at the end of June 2018 after filing a complaint with the Royal Court against an officer who tortured him during a previous eight-year prison term for his human rights activism. He was held for months without charge, which he protested against by going on hunger strike, before being put on trial in the SCC on 8 September 2020.

After the verdict and sentencing in April 2021, on 16 August the Court of Appeal [increased](#) al-Omair's prison term from seven years to nine, to be followed by a

nine-year travel ban. No reason was given for this ruling, but ALQST understands that the Public Prosecution is still calling for al-Omair's sentence to be increased even further. The authorities may also be intending to bring new charges against al-Omair relating to his writings while in jail, which could lead to a further prison sentence. During his time in Al-Ha'ir Prison al-Omair has smuggled out various communiqués denouncing the Saudi courts and the Counter-Terrorism and Anti-Cybercrime Laws under which he was arrested and tried, and denying the legitimacy of his trial and sentencing.



Abdulaziz al-Odah

Also in late April 2021, blogger **Abdulaziz al-Odah** was [sentenced](#) to five years in prison, half of it suspended, on charges relating to the peaceful expression of his opinions. Al-Odah was arrested in September 2019 after publishing comments on his Twitter account.

On 26 October 2021, the SCC sentenced a Yemeni journalist, **Ali Mohsen Abu Lahoum**, to a staggering 15 years in prison. Abu Lahoum, detained since 23 August, was charged with publishing articles on social media. The ruling was upheld on 1 January 2022.

Meanwhile, a number of human rights activists and dissidents sentenced in previous years attempted to have their convictions overturned in 2021, but instead had them upheld on appeal and in some cases their sentences even increased. Woman human rights defender **Nassima al-Sadah** had her sentence of five years in prison and a five-year travel ban, handed down in November 2020, [upheld](#) on appeal on 22 March 2021.

Also in March 2021, an additional one-year prison sentence handed down to human rights defender **Mohammed al-Otaibi** in December 2020 was [increased](#) on appeal to three years, which, added to a 14-year sentence issued in 2018, resulted in a 17-year prison term in total. Al-Otaibi co-founded a civic association, the Union for Human Rights, that was denied a licence, and was extradited to Saudi Arabia from Qatar in May 2017 while on his way to Norway, where he had been offered political asylum.



Mohammed al-Otaibi

Palestinians and Jordanians sentenced in a politically motivated trial

On 8 August 2021, the Specialised Criminal Court (SCC) [sentenced](#) dozens of Palestinians and Jordanians resident in Saudi Arabia to prison terms ranging from six months to 22 years, after a mass trial marred by serious violations of international fair trial guarantees. Neither their relatives nor international observers from foreign embassies were able to attend the trial, and there were no independent lawyers present.

At the beginning of 2019, the authorities had carried out the [mass arrest](#) of at least 68 Palestinians and Jordanians with a connection to the Palestinian cause. After roughly a year of arbitrary detention, on 8 March 2020 the individuals were brought before the SCC in Riyadh, on charges mostly linked to membership of or support for the Palestinian group Hamas or the Muslim Brotherhood, or collecting donations for Palestine. Although the Public Prosecutor invoked the Counter-Terrorism and Anti-Cybercrime Laws, the charge sheet made no reference to any specific act of terrorism or violence. These vaguely formulated laws are frequently used to stifle fundamental freedoms in Saudi Arabia.

Among those sentenced on 8 August 2021 were ailing 84-year-old **Mohammed Saleh al-Khudari** (see “Detainees at risk”, [page 34](#)), a former Palestinian official, who got 15 years with half the term suspended, and his son **Hani al-Khudari**, who was given three years. A small number were acquitted.

Ongoing trials

Ten Nubian Egyptians detained without charge since July 2020 (for more details see “arbitrary arrests”, [page 15](#)) were finally brought to trial on 10 November 2021. The ten were transferred from Abha Prison in Asir to Riyadh and brought before the Specialised Criminal Court (SCC), where they were informed of the charges against them, which related to the peaceful exercise of their rights of assembly and association. The next session of their trial was scheduled to be held on 24 January 2022.

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 Qatif governorate.

The right to freedom of association is severely curtailed 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.

Trial proceedings continued during 2021 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 several trial sessions throughout 2021, most recently on 28 December. The charges, which are vague and contravene his right to express his opinion, include “lack of commitment to good citizenship”. His trial continues; another session was scheduled for 31 January 2022.

The trial has 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 and 2020, a majority of which were postponed for unknown reasons, the last session in his trial to date took place at the SCC on 6 July 2021. Despite his family being told that a further hearing would take place, nothing has yet been scheduled and the trial remains pending.

7. Use of the Death Penalty



The Saudi state executed 67 individuals during 2021, more than twice as many as in 2020 but well below the figure for any other year since King Salman came to the throne in January 2015. For the first time in many years, no executions were carried out solely for drugs-related offences. Meanwhile, the execution of a young man in June 2021 for offences apparently committed when he may have been only 17 years old cast further doubt on the authorities' claims to have abolished the death penalty for minors.

Saudi Arabia has for years been among the countries carrying out the highest numbers of executions in the world. During the first five years of King Salman's reign, over 800 executions were carried out, peaking at 185 in 2019, the highest recorded number in recent Saudi history. The following year, 2020, saw a sharp fall in the number of executions carried out in the kingdom, to 27, but it was not clear whether this was a one-off reduction – perhaps related to the COVID-19 pandemic and the suspension of the courts for four months, or to the increased international attention focused on Riyadh as it hosted the G20 summit – or the start of a new trend.

On 18 January 2021, Saudi Arabia's official Human Rights Commission announced that the reduced number of executions in 2020 was linked to a moratorium on use of the death penalty for drugs-related offences. No such change of policy has been officially declared, but during 2021 no executions were recorded solely for drugs-related offences. Fifty-seven of those executed in 2021 had been convicted of murder, including four for terrorist-related killings. Six individuals were executed

for other alleged acts of terrorism, and three junior members of the armed forces were executed for high treason. One man was executed for a variety of non-political crimes of violence.

Of the 67 individuals executed in total, all but one were male; 17 (25%) were non-Saudi nationals from a variety of Arab, African and South Asian countries.

The majority (46) of the death sentences carried out in 2021 were passed on the basis of *qisas*, for murder (see box below). Six more convicted murderers were sentenced to death on the basis of *hudud*, along with six sentenced for other crimes. However, the six men executed for crimes described as “terrorism” were all sentenced on the basis of *ta’zir*, judicial discretion, where there is no fixed penalty in law and the judge may use his personal discretion to determine the punishment as he sees fit.

Hudud, qisas, ta’zir:

The bases on which Saudi judges may apply the death penalty

- ***Hudud***

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

- ***Qisas (requit, a form of retributive justice)***

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

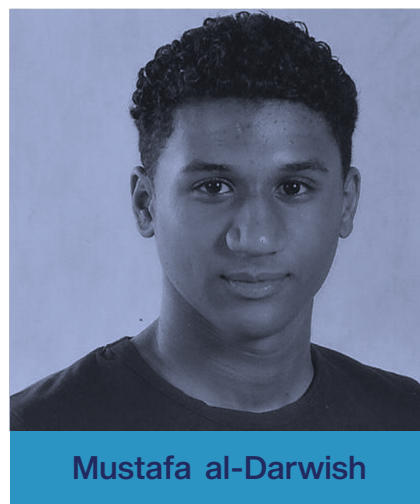
- **Ta'zir**

In the absence of a codified criminal law in Saudi Arabia, if cases do not involve specified *hudud* crimes, and where the concept of *qisas* does not apply, there is no clear rationale for sentencing once a guilty verdict is reached, and it is left to the judge's discretion to decide the appropriate penalty. Most religious scholars do not accept that *ta'zir*, judicial discretion, extends to the death penalty, but the Saudi authorities insist on giving judges the power to hand down death sentences on anyone as they see fit, according to their own personal judgement.

Doubt cast on claims to have abolished the death penalty for minors

On 15 June 2021, **Mustafa Hashem al-Darwish**, born in 1994, was [executed](#) for offences he allegedly committed as a teenager, calling into doubt the Saudi authorities' claim to have abolished the death penalty for minors. He was accused of participating in protests in Qatif, in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province, which mainly occurred in 2011-12, when he would have been between 17 and 19 years old.

After al-Darwish's arrest in 2015, he was held in solitary confinement, tortured and forced to sign a document confessing to the accusations made against him. After two years of pre-trial detention in violation of the law, he was brought before the Specialised Criminal Court (SCC) in 2017. Following a trial marred by numerous violations of international fair trial guarantees, including failure to investigate his allegations of torture, he was sentenced to death on the basis of *ta'zir* (the judge's discretion) in 2018. The sentence was upheld by the Supreme Court on 3 June 2021, and his execution took place 12 days later without his family being informed.



Mustafa al-Darwish

Amid international criticism of their dismal human rights record, in 2020 the Saudi authorities purportedly issued a decree ending judges' discretion to apply the death penalty to minors. However, it contained various loopholes leaving several ways in which minors can still be executed, such as by excluding cases brought under the Counter-Terrorism Law, as in al-Darwish's case. Yet Saudi Arabia's official Human Rights Commission later insisted that "no one in Saudi Arabia will be executed for a crime committed as a minor".

In a more positive development, in August 2020, after intense political pressure, the Public Prosecution ordered a review of the death sentences passed against **Ali al-Nimr**, **Dawoud al-Marhoun** and **Abdullah al-Zaher** for acts they allegedly committed when they were minors. As a result, their sentences were commuted to 10-year prison terms. On 27 October 2021, Ali al-Nimr was released after serving his sentence, and Abdullah al-Zaher was released on 14 November.

Meanwhile, dozens more detainees, including minors, remain at risk of execution.



Ali al-Nimr



Dawoud al-Marhoun



Abdullah al-Zaher

8. Forced Evictions and Displacement



The Saudi authorities in 2021 continued to illegally expropriate land for development and force the eviction of hundreds of residents, including, in November, by demolishing a whole neighbourhood in Jeddah.

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. A stark example occurred in 2020, with the brutal eviction of thousands of members of the Huwaitat tribe in the Red Sea area in order to push forward the grandiose Neom megacity project.

Several demolitions took place throughout 2021. Although ALQST has not been able to confirm the details with information from people on the ground, reports 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 14 April 2021, a number of homes were demolished in the village of Tendaha, outside Khamis Mushait in the southern region of Asir. Videos circulated on social media showing bulldozers demolishing the homes, as well as injuries and distress caused to the residents evicted. And in November, the whole Gulail neighbourhood in Jeddah was demolished to make way for a new development in the area. Videos showed the large scale of the demolitions, and residents who had been affected.

Such examples likely represent only a fraction of the demolitions that may 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.

Violations accompanying the Neom megacity project

The Saudi authorities have repeatedly committed violations in their bid to remove local inhabitants from their land and homes in order to proceed with their Neom megacity project, part of Crown Prince 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.

The Saudi Public Investment Fund (PIF) acquired title to the whole area in April 2017. Despite assurances to local communities that they would not be evicted, emergency acquisition orders were secretly issued for privately owned land. On 1 January 2020, local authorities informed residents that they were to be compulsorily evicted, as their land was required for the Neom megacity project. Despite local opposition, in March 2020 the authorities began pressuring people by sending in Special Forces to raid the homes of those resisting eviction, aiming to intimidate people and coerce them into agreeing to being unfairly evicted from their homes. At least 20 residents were arrested, some of them, according to sources, for coming to the defence of a kidnapped child; and on 13 April 2020 Abdul Rahim al-Huwaiti, a resident of Al-Khuraiba village and a member of the Huwaitat tribe, was killed in his house by Special Forces using heavy weapons.

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 to publicly condemn al-Huwaiti's resistance to 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 make their own resettlement arrangements, at locations much further away. It has been reported that some who were offered this compensation have in fact received as little as 17,000 Saudi riyals (US\$4,500).

9. Women's Rights



On 8 February 2021 Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman [announced](#) that four new laws were to be adopted by the end of the year, including Saudi Arabia's first codified Personal Status (or Family) Law, to "reform the kingdom's judicial institutions". In the absence of a codified family law, rulings on family issues are left entirely to the discretion of judges, who often discriminate harshly against women. However, no further details about the new laws have been published to date so it is not possible to gauge their likely impact, and, despite recent minor reforms, 2021 ended with the oppressive male guardianship system still far from being dismantled, and women still subject to male control.

The male guardianship system treats even adult women as minors and lets male family members take key decisions in their lives. Women cannot freely make decisions about their own education, employment, health, or who they want to marry; neither can they pass their nationality on to their children.

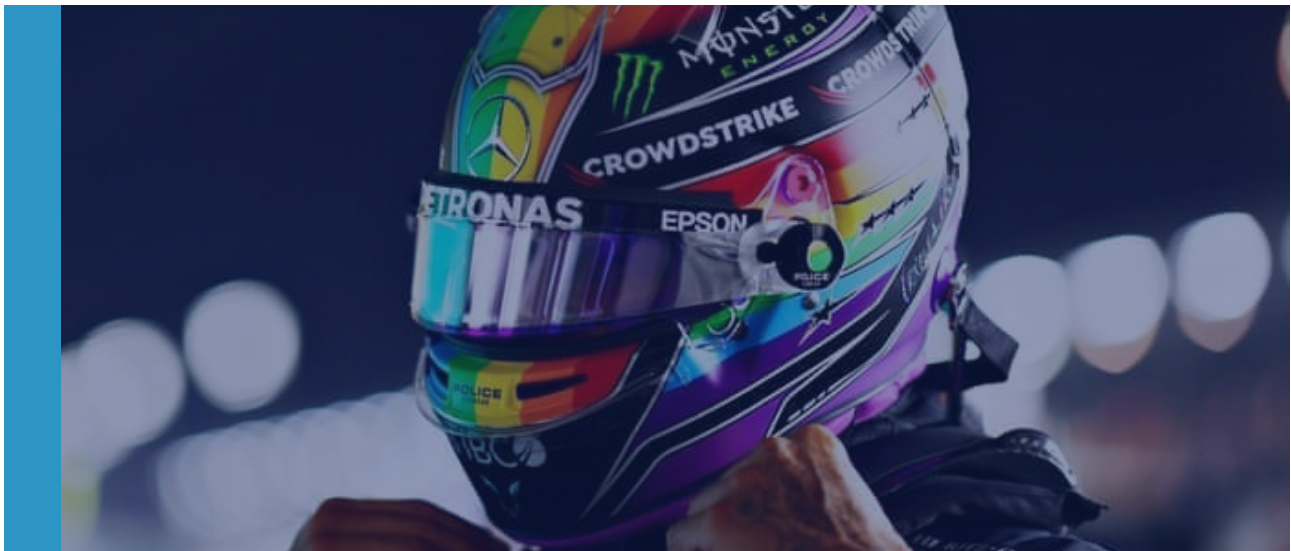
In a bid to improve their image in the West, the Saudi authorities have undertaken a number of reforms in recent years, including lifting some of the restrictions women face. However, the measures to date fall far short of the changes needed to achieve gender equality, and are riddled with loopholes. It remains a crime for a woman to "disobey" her male guardian (father, husband, brother or even son), effectively rendering null and void any new freedoms she may in theory have acquired. While a woman may now legally be entitled to apply for her own passport and study abroad, she can be stopped by her male guardian from leaving the country if he files a case against her of disobedience or absconding.

Moreover, gender-based violence is not adequately defined in law and criminalised, and recent reforms that are supposed to protect women from abuse lack adequate means of enforcement, leaving many trapped in abusive relationships. Gender-based violence continues to have a devastating impact on many women's lives.

Furthermore, women are not able to leave detention centres or state-run shelters without having to seek and receive the consent of their male guardians, who may have previously abused them. This can lead to a situation of prolonged administrative detention if a male guardian refuses to sign a release form or collect a woman under his guardianship.

But what most undermines the authorities' claims to be making great strides towards reform on women's rights, and Mohammed bin Salman's claim to be championing women's "empowerment", is the state's treatment – arbitrary arrest, imprisonment, torture and continuing harassment – of the very women who have been leading the fight for women's rights in Saudi Arabia (for more see [page 21](#)).

10. Rights of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) People



In Saudi Arabia, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people can face imprisonment, flogging and even execution for expressing their sexual orientation or gender identity. While the Saudi authorities like to portray themselves as striving for reform, LGBT people continue to face repression and discrimination.

Saudi Arabia has no written laws concerning LGBT rights. In the absence of codified laws, these matters are left to the discretion of judges, who often impose harsh rulings against anyone accused of having sexual relations outside marriage, including same-sex relationships. Sentences can include imprisonment, flogging and even execution.

No steps have been taken to grant LGBT people basic rights such as freedom from discrimination, nor is there any indication that the authorities are willing to do so. In December 2021, Saudi Arabia rejected a UN General Assembly draft that called upon states to take measures to eliminate discriminatory laws and practices including those based on sexual orientation and gender identity.

The lack of LGBT rights in Saudi Arabia has been referred to several times by global celebrities invited to the kingdom. In 2019, rapper Nicki Minaj cancelled a scheduled performance in Saudi Arabia, citing her support for women, LGBT people and freedom of expression. More recently, in December 2021, ahead of the first Saudi Arabian Grand Prix, Formula 1 driver Lewis Hamilton said publicly that he did not feel comfortable competing in the country given the oppression of the LGBT community.

11. Rights of the Stateless Bidoon



The large number of stateless persons in Saudi Arabia, known as “Bidoon” (meaning in Arabic “without”, i.e. without nationality), continued to struggle and suffer hardship in every aspect of their lives as 2021 came to an end, including education, health, work and family life. In November 2021, the Saudi authorities made moves towards the naturalisation of an unspecified number of foreign residents “with unique expertise”, but this did not include any stateless persons.

In the absence of official statistics, estimates put the number of Bidoon at anywhere between 70,000 and 250,000 individuals. They are mainly either descendants of nomadic tribes who failed to register for Saudi nationality when the nation state was being formed in the 1930s, or so-called “mawalid al-mamlaka” (born in the kingdom), generations of people born and raised in the country after their grandparents overstayed their residence permits, and who have no pathway to Saudi citizenship yet no ties to any other country. For both categories of Bidoon, Saudi Arabia is the only country they have ever known or lived in.

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.

In 2021, the Saudi authorities reportedly granted citizenship to an unspecified number of foreign residents, with a Royal Decree [announced](#) on 11 November 2021 "granting Saudi citizenship to a selection of distinguished talents, with unique expertise and specialisations". However, no steps were taken to grant citizenship or basic rights to the Bidoon, even though they have much deeper ties to Saudi Arabia than most expatriates, however talented.

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.

12. Migrant Workers' Rights



In March 2021, the Saudi authorities introduced limited reforms to the notorious *kafala* (sponsorship) system, under which foreigners working in the kingdom are dependent on an individual resident who acts as his or her sponsor. However, the *kafala* system has not been fully dismantled, and the new arrangement contains significant loopholes and exemptions, including not covering millions of domestic workers.

Some reforms to the *kafala* system were introduced in March. First announced in November 2020 as part of the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development's "[Labour Reform Initiative](#)" (LRI), 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 the guidelines behind the initiative fail to address several important issues, raising doubts about how much difference they will make in practice. One major omission is that various categories of worker are not covered by the new reforms, including millions of domestic workers.

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

Migrant workers make up roughly one-third of the population of Saudi Arabia, approximately 10 million out of an estimated 34 million people, according to the General Authority for Statistics. Of these, 75% come from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Egypt and the Philippines. They face multiple problems due to a number of complex and thorny regulations in the Labour Law and private sector regulations. By tying a worker to an individual resident who acts as his or her sponsor, the *kafala* system makes him or her vulnerable to exploitation, as the sponsor can change the nature of the employment or even transfer the sponsorship to another employer 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 that requires the sponsor's consent. Workers who abscond due to ill-treatment and unbearable working conditions often end up working in the black economy and risk further exploitation.

13. The War in Yemen



As the conflict in Yemen entered its seventh year, fighting continued with a large-scale military escalation in Ma'rib Governorate from February 2021. The warring parties continued to commit grave violations, including indiscriminate attacks on civilian areas by Houthi forces, and indiscriminate military air raids by the Saudi-led coalition. Shamefully, in October the UN Human Rights Council narrowly voted against renewing the only international mechanism to investigate human rights abuses in Yemen's conflict, following extensive lobbying by Saudi Arabia and other coalition partners. Western governments continued to supply arms to the coalition.

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. Despite earlier talks of a ceasefire, the fighting has continued since a large-scale military escalation in Ma'rib Governorate in early 2021. According to the [Yemen Data Project](#), the cumulative number of air raids since the start of the war reached over 24,000 in 2021, 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 2021. Over 20 million people are now in need of humanitarian assistance, and over 16 million

people are food insecure. A report published by [the United Nations Development Programme \(UNDP\)](#) in November projected that the death toll from Yemen's war would reach 377,000 by the end of 2021, nearly 60% of which would be indirectly caused by issues associated with conflict, like lack of access to food, water and healthcare.

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 on 1 March 2021 saw donors pledge a further \$1.7 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 number of COVID-19 infections spiked in 2021, with 99% of the population unvaccinated. Over 1500 COVID-19-related deaths have been recorded since April 2020, although the numbers are likely to be far higher, with COVID-related data unavailable in much of the country. 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.

Failure to renew UN war crimes probe

On 7 October 2021, the UN Human Right Council shamefully voted against renewing the mandate of the Group of Eminent Experts on Yemen, established in 2017 to investigate violations and abuses committed by all parties to the conflict. Members narrowly voted to reject a resolution to give the independent investigators another two years to monitor atrocities in Yemen's conflict, following extensive lobbying by Saudi Arabia and other coalition partners, including the use of both incentives and threats.

This mandate was the only international mechanism to investigate human rights abuses in Yemen's conflict, and its discontinuation is a major setback for accountability. Since the vote, a coalition of NGOs has [appealed](#) to the United Nations General Assembly to establish a new investigative mechanism to pave the way towards justice for Yemen.

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 2021. 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 supplies from Europe also constitute a substantial part of the overall resources 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.

Although the incoming Biden administration promised to help end the war in Yemen and “end all American support for offensive operations in the war”, a welcome suspension of arms sales to Saudi Arabia and the UAE announced in January 2021 proved to be only temporary; the US government has since made a U-turn and continued to provide coalition partners with arms. In April 2021, it approved a Trump-era \$23.4 billion transfer of sophisticated weaponry to the UAE, and in November 2021, a new \$650m sale of air-to-air missiles to Saudi Arabia was approved.

14. International Developments Regarding Saudi Human Rights



The year began with significant international pressure on Saudi Arabia to improve its appalling human rights record, following increased international focus on the kingdom during its 2020s G20 presidency, and with the new US administration vowing to take a more critical stance toward Riyadh. While promises to drastically change US-Saudi relations failed to materialise, some positive steps were brought to bear on the Saudi authorities internationally, including a strong resolution from the European Parliament. Meanwhile, the Saudi authorities carried over into 2021 their previous intensive PR strategy of investing in international sporting and music events, to which at times there was some backlash.

Public relations and the international reputation of the kingdom are major preoccupations for the Saudi authorities, especially Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, and particularly since the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi shocked the world in 2018. In a bid to attract vital foreign investment for his flagship development programme, Vision 2030, as well as fend off Western criticism, the crown prince seeks to project the image of a country boldly striving for reform.

US U-turn

On 20 January 2021, Democrat Joe Biden was sworn in as the new president of the United States. The incoming administration vowed to take a more critical stance toward Riyadh in contrast to the outgoing Trump administration, which repeatedly acted to deflect criticism of the Saudi leadership. Indeed, in January 2021 Biden

imposed a [temporary suspension](#) of arms sales to Saudi Arabia and the UAE; and in February US intelligence released a long-withheld report [concluding](#) that Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman approved the operation to kill Jamal Khashoggi.

Following the release of the report, the White House announced new sanctions and visa bans (the "[Khashoggi Ban](#)") against 76 Saudi nationals believed to have been engaged in threatening dissidents overseas. It resisted calls to sanction Mohammed bin Salman himself, however, and indeed the previous promises to "recalibrate" US-Saudi ties proved to be more modest as 2021 progressed. This could be seen, for example, in the September approval of a \$500 million deal on military support services for Saudi Arabia, and the November approval of a \$650m sale of air-to-air missiles.

Meanwhile, in the battle to hold the perpetrators of Khashoggi's murder to account, several important steps were taken by civil society actors. On 19 March 2021, a complaint filed in October 2020 by Democracy for the Arab World Now (DAWN), a US-based non-profit organization founded by Khashoggi, and his fiancée Hatice Cengiz, was successfully [served](#), and in August DAWN, in coordination with the US State Department, launched the [Khashoggi Ban Working Group](#) to implement the ban.

Europe: mixed actions

Actions were also taken in Europe to hold Saudi Arabia's leadership accountable over Khashoggi's murder. On 1 March 2021 Reporters without Borders (RSF) [filed](#) a criminal complaint with the German Public Prosecutor General targeting individuals responsible for "crimes against humanity". The complaint also included the systematic harassment of journalists in Saudi Arabia.

In July 2021, the European Parliament passed a [resolution](#) condemning human rights abuses in Saudi Arabia, in particular the Saudi authorities' use of the death penalty and ongoing execution of child offenders. This was the parliament's third resolution on human rights in Saudi Arabia in recent years, and followed an October 2020 resolution in the lead-up to the November G20 summit hosted by Riyadh.

European parliamentarians continued to voice their criticism of Saudi Arabia's human rights record in 2021, with over 160 signing onto a [statement](#) in support of Saudi women human rights defenders to mark International Women's Day in March, and over 120 supporting a similar [statement](#) in November. Meanwhile, on 27 September the first EU-Saudi Arabia dialogue on human rights took place.

In December 2021, French President Emmanuel Macron made a tour of the Gulf region and met with Mohammed bin Salman, becoming the first western leader to meet the crown prince since the 2018 killing of Khashoggi, pointing to a renewed normalisation of relations with the Saudi leadership.

Sportswashing

The Saudi authorities continued to pursue their intensive global PR offensive and invest heavily in sports and entertainment. In October 2021, the long-drawn-out bid by Saudi Arabia's sovereign wealth fund, the Public Investment Fund (PIF), to acquire Newcastle United Football Club in the UK was confirmed in a £300m deal. In approving the takeover, the English Premier League accepted the argument that the PIF, which has more than \$300bn in assets, is a separate entity from the Saudi state. It is in fact inseparable from the state, and is chaired and managed by Mohammed bin Salman.

In December, Saudi Arabia hosted its first ever Formula 1 Grand Prix, which was held alongside several music concerts. Ahead of the race, NGOs called on participating drivers, fans and entertainers to avoid contributing to the whitewashing of the kingdom's image, and either speak out about human rights abuses in the country or refuse to participate in the event. Following these calls, F1 star driver Lewis Hamilton publicly stated that he was not comfortable competing in the country given the repression of the LGBT community.

Digital rights

In July 2021 the Pegasus Project, an investigation by Amnesty International and Forbidden Stories, published its findings. It highlighted the scale on which Pegasus spyware from the Israeli firm NSO Group was being used by repressive states, including Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain, to hack the phone accounts of people around the world including human rights activists, journalists and government officials. A list of 50,000 phone numbers were identified as possible surveillance targets. Among those targeted were ALQST's late Executive Director, the Emirati human rights defender Alaa Al-Siddiq, and ALQST's founder, Saudi human rights defender Yahya Assiri.

A significant backlash followed these revelations. After pressure from human rights organisations, NSO Group was prevented from exhibiting its Pegasus software at the International Security Expo in London on 28-29 September and, even more significantly, in November the Biden administration placed NSO Group on a US blacklist.

Awards

In January 2021 human rights defender Loujain al-Hathloul was [nominated](#) as a finalist for the prestigious Martin Ennals Award for her activism for women's rights in Saudi Arabia. In April, she received the 2020 Václav Havel Prize, a prestigious award that honours outstanding civil society action in defence of human rights. The nomination of many of Saudi Arabia's human rights heroes in recent years for international prizes and awards has been instrumental in bringing their courageous work to the world's notice and keeping the names of long-detained prisoners of conscience at the forefront of attention.

15. Recommendations



Recommendations for the international community:

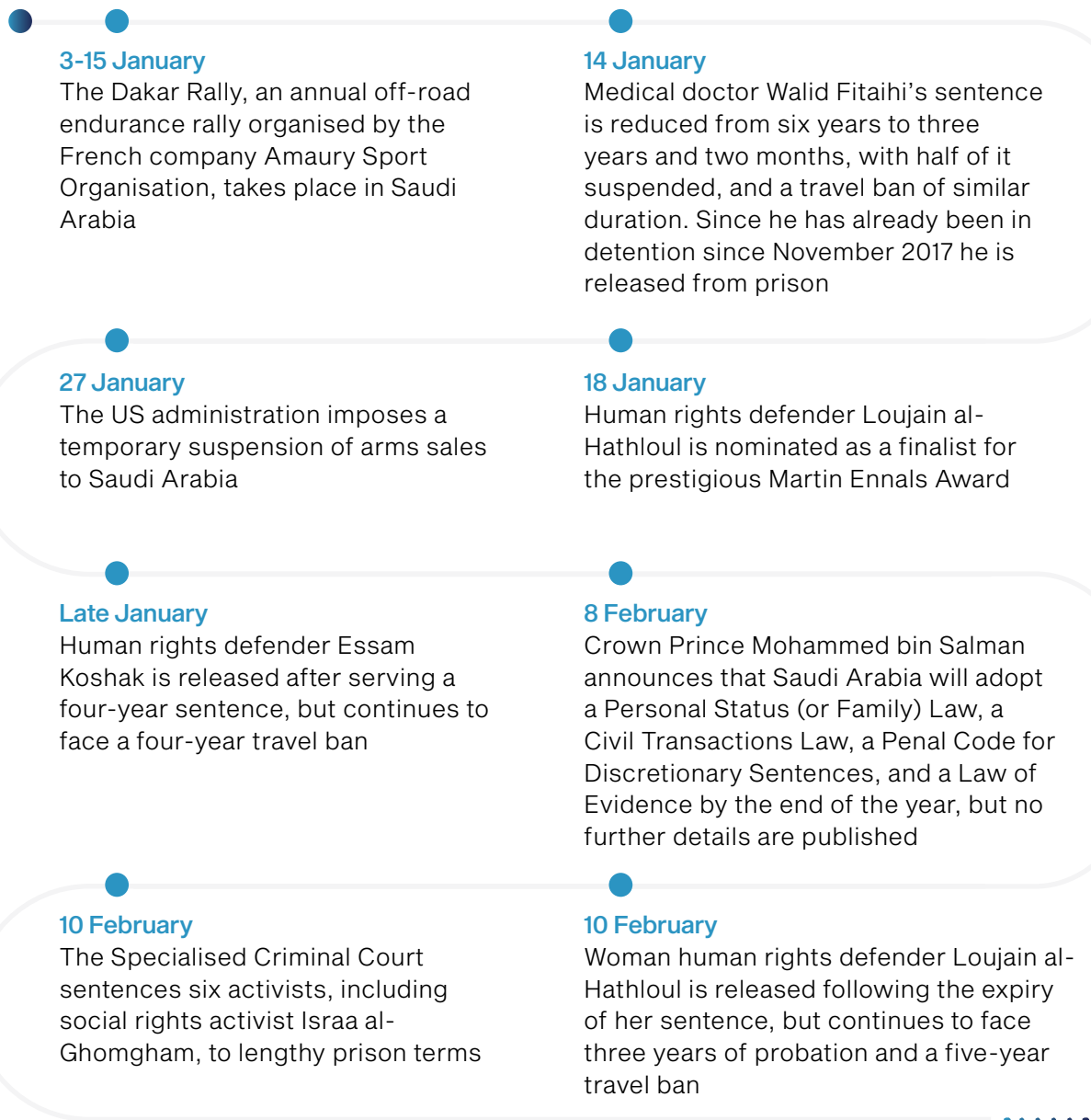
- Take action to ensure that an impartial, thorough, independent and effective criminal investigation is opened into the murder of Jamal Khashoggi, in which all perpetrators, including those at the head of the chain of command, are identified and prosecuted in a fair and transparent trial;
- Establish 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 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;
- Ensure that the four new laws announced on 8 February 2021 by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman to reform the country's judicial institutions, including a codified Personal Status (Family) Law, comply with international standards, and fully safeguard the rights of women and children;
- 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 or those convicted of offences carried out when 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.

16. Timeline of Human Rights-Related Events in 2021



24 February

Mohammed Baqir al-Nimr, the father of imprisoned youth Ali al-Nimr, is arrested by security forces in Awamiyah; he is released two days later

27 February

US intelligence releases a long-withheld report concluding that Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman approved the operation to kill journalist Jamal Khashoggi

February-March

Thirteen activists and bloggers arrested in April 2019 are conditionally released: Salah al-Haidar, Bader al-Ibrahim, Mohammed al-Sadiq, Thumar al-Marzouqi, Abdullah al-Duhailan, Nayef al-Hindas, Ali al-Saffar, Redha al-Boori, Khadija al-Harbi, Moqbel al-Saqqar, Fahad Abalkhail, Ayman al-Drees and Abdullah al-Shehri

Late February

Journalist Alaa Brinji is released after serving a seven-year prison term, but continues to face an eight-year travel ban

March

Doctor and blogger Loujain Daghestani is arrested; she is released in June

6-14 March

More than 30 prisoners of conscience, including human rights activists Mohammed al-Qahtani, Fawzan al-Harbi, Essa al-Nukheifi and Fahad al-Araini and writer Mohammed al-Hudaif, go on hunger strike in protest against harassment and ill-treatment by prison officials at Al-Ha'ir in Riyadh, including being held on the same wing as psychiatric detainees

22 March

The Court of Appeal upholds the five-year prison sentence of woman human rights defender Nassima al-Sadah

14 March

Limited reforms are introduced of the notorious *kafala* (sponsorship) system, under which foreigners working in Saudi Arabia are dependent on an individual resident who acts as his or her sponsor

April

Cases of COVID-19 spread in Al-Ha'ir Prison

5 April

Humanitarian activist Abdulrahman al-Sadhan is sentenced to 20 years in prison followed by a 20-year travel ban

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8 April

Writer Khaled al-Mahoush is sentenced to 10 years in prison, to be followed by a travel ban of similar duration

19 April

Loujain al-Hathloul receives the 2020 Václav Havel Prize for her activism for women's rights in Saudi Arabia

25 April

Human rights defender Khaled al-Omair is sentenced to seven years in prison and a travel ban of similar duration

20 April

Human rights defender Mohammed al-Rabiah is sentenced to six years in prison and a six-year travel ban

Late April

Blogger Abdulaziz al-Odah is sentenced to five years in prison, half of it suspended

8 May

Prisoner of conscience Zaheer Ali Shareeda dies in mysterious circumstances

15 June

Mustafa Hashem al-Darwish is executed for alleged participation in protests in Qatif, in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province, which occurred when he was between 17 and 19 years old

May-June

The authorities carry out a wave of arrests of bloggers, including Abdullah Gilan, Abdulrahman al-Sheikhi, Asma al-Subeaei, Lina Alsharif, Rina Abdulaziz and Yasmine al-Ghufaili

26 June

Women human rights defenders Samar Badawi and Nassima al-Sadah are released following the expiry of their sentences

27 June

Religious reciter Mohammed Bojbara, in prison for filming a Shia religious ceremony, is released after eight months

8 July

The authorities carry out a series of raids in Abha City, arresting a number of academics including Sharia professor Qassem al-Qathardi al-Alma'i, Arabic professor Mohammed al-Hazemi, and Ali bin Hassan al-Alma'i

6 July

Islamic scholar Salman al-Odah attends the last session to date of his trial in the Specialised Criminal Court

8 July

The European Parliament passes a resolution condemning human rights abuses in Saudi Arabia, in particular the Saudi authorities' use of the death penalty and ongoing execution of child offenders

22 July

Activist Abdullah al-Mubarak is arrested

Late July

Writers Abdulaziz al-Dukhail and Ali al-Shadwi and journalist Aqel al-Bahili are released without charge

30 July

There is an attempt to kill human rights defender Khaled al-Omair in Al-Ha'ir Prison

8 August

Dozens of Palestinians and Jordanians associated with the Palestinian cause are handed prison sentences ranging from six months to 22 years

9-12 August

Human rights defender Mohammed al-Qahtani stages another hunger strike in protest at not being transferred out of the mental patients' ward at Al-Ha'ir Prison, and at being mistreated and denied books

16 August

The Court of Appeal increases the seven-year prison sentence against human rights defender Khaled al-Omair to nine years

14 August

Abdulwahhab al-Dowaish, son of disappeared preacher Sulaiman al-Dowaish, is re-arrested

September

The Court of Appeal upholds the six-year prison sentence of human rights defender Mohammed al-Rabiah

Mid-September

Human rights activist Yasser al-Ayyaf is released after serving a two-year prison sentence

Late September

Academic Abdul Rahman al-Shumayri is released after serving a 15-year prison term but continues to face a 15-year travel ban

28-29 September

Following pressure from human rights organisations, Israeli technology company NSO Group is denied permission to exhibit its Pegasus software at the International Security Expo in London

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5 October

The Court of Appeal upholds the 20-year prison sentence of humanitarian activist Abdulrahman al-Sadhan

7 October

The UN Human Rights Council narrowly votes against renewing the only international mechanism to investigate human rights abuses in Yemen's conflict, following extensive lobbying by Saudi Arabia and other coalition partners

12 October

Reform advocate Musa al-Qarni is brutally murdered in a prison cell in Dhahban Prison

7 October

The long-drawn-out bid by Saudi Arabia's sovereign wealth fund, the Public Investment Fund, to acquire Newcastle United Football Club in the UK is confirmed in a £300m deal

18 October

Abdulwahhab al-Dowaish's brother Abdulrahman, son of missing preacher Sulaiman al-Dowaish, is arrested

Mid-October

Alabbas al-Maliki is released after serving a four-year prison sentence

26 October

Yemeni journalist Ali Mohsen Abu Lahoum is sentenced to 15 years in prison

Late October

Academic Saud al-Sarhan is arrested and forcibly disappeared

27 October

Ali al-Nimr is released after serving a 10-year prison term but continues to face a 10-year travel ban

5 November

Abdulrahman al-Dowaish is put on trial behind closed doors without his family's knowledge

21 November

Amer Matrook Alfaleh, son of writer and political scientist Matrook Alfaleh, is detained and disappeared; he is released on 1 December

14 November

Abdullah al-Zaher is released after serving a 10-year prison term but continues to face a 10-year travel ban

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Late 2021

Prisoner of conscience Ibrahim al-Yamani is moved to a cell with four *takfiris* who have previously threatened several times to kill him

5 December

Saudi Arabia hosts its first Formula 1 Grand Prix, at which top driver Lewis Hamilton publicly states that he is not comfortable competing in the country

24 December

Writer and researcher Abdullah al-Yahya is arrested after posting tweets criticising normalisation with Israel



The Spotlight Fades, Repression Mounts Again:

Human Rights in Saudi
Arabia in 2021

ALQST Annual Report
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