

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

Index: MDE 23/3301/2016

22 January 2016

Saudi Arabia: King Salman's first year in power has been a dark year for human rights

King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud's first year in power has seen the country's human rights record deteriorate markedly, said Amnesty International on the eve of the first anniversary of his accession to the throne on 23 January 2015.

Despite limited improvements in the field of women's rights, the Saudi Arabian authorities have pursued a persistent and ruthless crackdown on all forms of dissent by, among other measures, detaining critics after grossly unfair trials before the Specialized Criminal Court, often on spurious terrorism charges, increased their use of the death penalty and maintained practices that discriminate against the country's Shi'a Muslim minority. The Kingdom's military has also repeatedly violated the laws of war in its military campaign in Yemen.

Dozens of human rights defenders, peaceful activists and dissidents remained behind bars after being imprisoned in previous years. Among them were blogger Raif Badawi and his lawyer Waleed Abu al-Khair, the first human rights defender to be sentenced after an unfair trial under Saudi Arabia's counter-terror law, in force since February 2014. Dozens more were jailed under the law in 2015, including human rights defenders Dr Abdulkareem al-Khoder and Dr Abdulrahman al-Hamid, both founding members of the now disbanded independent Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association (ACPRA), also after unfair trials. Most of the organization's other founding members remained in prison.

Prominent writer Dr Zuhair Kutbi was sentenced in December 2015 to four years in prison by the Specialized Criminal Court, followed by a five-year ban on overseas travel, a fine of 100,000 Saudi Arabian riyals (about US\$26,600) and a 15-year ban on writing and giving interviews to the media. The court also ordered him to erase his social media accounts. It suspended two years of his four-year sentence because of his poor health, but indicated they would be re-imposed if he "offended" again.

Ashraf Fayadh, a 35-year-old Palestinian poet and artist born and residing in Saudi Arabia, was sentenced to death in November for apostasy after the authorities accused him of questioning religion and spreading atheist thought through his poetry.

The authorities also intimidated and harassed activists, including by summoning them for interrogation and threatening them with lawsuits. Samar Badawi, a prominent human rights activist who is the sister of Raif Badawi and former wife of Waleed Abu al-Khair,

was arrested and detained for a day in January 2016, at least partly in connection with her alleged role in managing a Twitter account campaigning for Waleed Abu al-Khair's release.

In November 2015, the Saudi Arabian authorities passed a law of associations that was more restrictive than a previous draft that had been accepted by the Shura Council over seven years earlier but never implemented. Unlike the previous draft, the current law of associations excluded any mention of "human rights", and extended wide discretionary powers to the Ministry of Social Affairs, including the power to deny licences to new organizations and to disband them if it deemed them to be "harming national unity". Throughout the year, the authorities continued to ban independent human rights associations and imprison its founding members, with lengthy prison terms for forming "unlicensed organizations". All public gatherings, including peaceful demonstrations, remained prohibited under an order issued by the Ministry of Interior in 2011.

During first year of King Salman's reign, the Saudi Arabian authorities carried out the highest number of executions in a 12-month period in two decades, including by executing 47 people in a single day on 2 January 2016. Over 151 people were executed between January and November, almost half of them for crimes which under international law must not be punishable by death. Some, such as prominent Shi'a cleric Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr, were sentenced to death and executed after grossly unfair trials before the Specialized Criminal Court.

The Specialized Criminal Court, used torture-tainted "confessions" to uphold death sentences against juvenile offenders. These included Ali al-Nimr, the nephew of Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr, and fellow Shi'a activists Dawood al-Marhoon and Abdullah al-Zaher, who were all under the age of 18 when they were arrested. All three underwent grossly unfair trials and their death sentences that were upheld at an unknown date in 2015 were based solely on "confessions" they claim were extracted under torture. The court refused to investigate their allegations of torture. They remain at risk of imminent execution.

Courts also continued to impose cruel and inhuman punishments, such as flogging, as additional punishments for some offences despite such punishments being absolutely prohibited by international law. In November a court in al-Khobar, in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province, upheld a sentence of two years in prison and 200 lashes against prominent human rights defender Mikhlif bin Daham al-Shammari for "stirring public opinion by sitting with the Shi'a" and "violating instructions by the rulers by holding a private gathering and tweeting".

In March 2015, the Saudi Arabia-led military coalition unleashed a military campaign on areas in Yemen controlled by the Huthi armed group and its allies. The coalition's air strikes killed and injured thousands of civilians, and destroyed civilian homes and infrastructure, including hospitals, schools, markets and factories, as well as vehicles carrying civilians and humanitarian assistance. Some of the attacks violated international humanitarian law and may have constituted war crimes. Together with a sea and air

blockade, the campaign severely worsened an already dire humanitarian situation in Yemen.

Some of the weapons that the Saudi Arabia-led coalition forces used in Yemen in unlawful attacks that killed civilians and destroyed civilian objects were produced and/or designed in the USA and UK. In addition to arming Saudi Arabia and other members of the coalition, the UK and US governments also provided logistical support and intelligence.

While a modest gain for women's rights came in the form of allowing them to stand for office and vote in the country's third ever municipal elections, they continued to be subjected to discrimination in law and in practice largely because of a male guardianship system. Women were also inadequately protected against sexual and other violence, even though a law criminalizing domestic violence was adopted in 2013, but remained unimplemented in practice.

Members of the Saudi Arabian Shi'a Muslim minority continued to face entrenched discrimination that limited their access to state services and employment. Shi'a leaders and activists were arrested, imprisoned, sentenced to death and some, such as Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr and three others, were executed. In January 2015, the appeal division of the Specialized Criminal Court upheld an eight-year prison term and a subsequent 10-year foreign travel ban imposed in August 2014 on prominent Shi'a cleric Sheikh Tawfiq Jaber Ibrahim al-'Amr for delivering religious sermons and speeches deemed to incite sectarianism, defame the ruling system, ridicule religious leaders, show disobedience to the ruler, and advocate change.

Throughout the year, Saudi Arabia's engagement with the UN Human Rights Council, UN treaty bodies and other human rights mechanisms on the promotion and protection of human rights fell far short of the highest standards it is required to uphold as a member of the Council, a position it has held since 2013. In September 2015, the Saudi Arabian authorities blocked a resolution calling for a UN-led independent investigation into alleged violations in Yemen. They also failed to respond to the Opinion adopted that same month by the UN's Working Group on Arbitrary Detention that called for the immediate release of nine prominent activists whom they had found to be arbitrarily detained and deprived of liberty. They had previously failed to reply to the request made by the Working Group in September 2014 for information about the situation of eight of the nine activists.

Amnesty International wrote to King Salman to raise its concerns on and recommendations to address Saudi Arabia's human rights record on 5 February 2015, but to date has not received a reply. It remains barred from entering Saudi Arabia to conduct human rights research and Saudi Arabian activists who have contacted the organization have been punished for doing so.

Instead of addressing the gross and systematic human rights violations in the country, the authorities generally dismissed international criticism of them, rejecting concerns raised about the imprisonment of dissidents and the death penalty as interference in the affairs of the Saudi Arabian judiciary, and launched a media charm offensive to “correct” the country’s image in international media.

Public Document

For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566 or +44 (0)77 7847 2126

email: press@amnesty.org

twitter: [@amnestypress](https://twitter.com/amnestypress)

International Secretariat, Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW, UK