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MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS IN 2018

Human rights defenders in the Middle East and North Africa have faced a wide array of threats from governments and armed groups in 2018, but they have also been at the centre of compelling stories of hard-won change and of attempts to stem crackdowns on freedom of expression by governments across the region and to document violations in conflict. Women human rights defenders have been prominently on the front lines of resistance, challenging entrenched gender discrimination and other patterns of human rights violations. Branded security threats by governments seeking to exploit an international wave of attempts to delegitimize those seen as undermining national interests, their resilience and courage have been inspirational.

WOMEN AT FOREFRONT OF CHALLENGE TO CLIMATE OF REPRESSION

On 24 June **Saudi Arabia** lifted its ban on women driving, just one of a wide range of discriminatory policies and practices against women in the Kingdom. While the step was long overdue, it was a testament to the bravery of women's human rights defenders who had disruptively defied the ban and drawn international media attention to it over decades.

It was bitterly ironic then that the authorities subjected some of those who had campaigned for a change that Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman was touting as a sign of progress to arbitrary detention and smear campaigns. Loujain al-Hathloul, Iman al-Nafjan and Aziza al-Yousef are among a group of activists held without charge since their arrest in May, a month before the ban was lifted, and sinisterly accused by government-aligned media of being "traitors" and posing a threat to state security. Several Saudi Arabian activists, including a number of women who have been arbitrarily detained since May 2018, have reportedly faced sexual harassment, torture and other forms of ill-treatment during interrogation. One of the activists reportedly attempted to take her own life repeatedly inside the prison.

Their plight reflects that of human rights defenders more generally in the country. Virtually all of them have been sentenced to lengthy prison terms, placed under travel bans or forced to leave the country. In January, Mohammad al-Otaibi and Abdullah al-Attawi were sentenced by the Specialized Criminal Court, the country's counter-terror court, to 14 and seven years in prison respectively for their human rights activism. In February, Issa al-Nukheifi was sentenced to six years in prison, followed by a six-year social media and travel ban, for criticizing the government and its policies on Twitter, while Essam Koshak was sentenced in the same month to four years in prison, followed by a four-year social media and travel ban, for supporting women's rights activism and speaking against the male guardianship system on Twitter.

Women's rights activists in **Iran** this year have also been courageously protesting an entrenched manifestation of a broader set of discriminatory practices against women. Dozens took off their headscarves in public to challenge forced *hijab* (veiling) and disrupt Iranian society's apparent acquiescence in this abusive and degrading practice.

The authorities have responded with a violent crackdown, part of a wider wave of repression against human rights defenders. Dozens of women have been beaten and arbitrarily detained and, in some cases, prosecuted and imprisoned for their peaceful campaigning.

Not only that, their lawyers and supporters have also faced harassment. Award-winning human rights lawyer Nasrin Sotoudeh, well-known for her work defending juvenile offenders on death row, was arrested in June and charged with serious national security offences stemming from her defence of women prosecuted for peacefully protesting forced *hijab*. To add insult to injury, her husband, Reza Khandan, was detained in September. Fellow human rights defender Farhad Meysami, who was found with badges reading "I am against forced *hijab*", has been in jail since July. Both face similarly bogus national security-related charges for their support of the brave women campaigning against forced *hijab*.

Other women human rights defenders arbitrarily detained this year include Hoda Amid and Najmeh Vahedi, whose activities to empower women and girls include teaching them about their rights in marriage, and Raheleh Rahemipour, who faces trial for a second time in reprisal for a complaint she filed with the UN on the enforced disappearance of her brother and his infant daughter in the 1980s.

Human rights defenders in **Egypt** have also felt the force of a heavyweight government intent on crushing challenges to its legitimacy. Moments of victory, such as the releases following international campaigning of Mahienour el-Massry, woman human rights defender, in January and of Haytham Mohamdeen, a labour rights lawyer who has defended hundreds of workers persecuted for forming independent unions and agitating for better working conditions, in October, punctured the climate of repression. However, too many others remain arbitrarily behind bars after speaking out against injustice and then finding ludicrous terrorism or security-related charges brought against them.

Amal Fathy was sentenced to two years' imprisonment in September for posting a video on Facebook decrying sexual harassment and the government's failure to address it. Ezzat Ghoniem, co-founder and director of the Egyptian Coordination for Rights and Freedoms, and Azzoz Mahgoub, a human rights lawyer at the same organization, remain detained incommunicado despite a court order to release them on 4 September. Other human rights defenders detained in 2018 include Hanan Badr el-Din and Ibrahim Metwaly, co-founders of the Families of the Forcibly Disappeared Association, the first held on fabricated charges of "membership in a banned group", the second arrested at the airport from where he was due to travel to Geneva to speak about enforced disappearances before the UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances; and Hisham Gaafar, director of the Mada Foundation for Media Development, an NGO which provides training and information to journalists on human rights and development, who has spent over three years in pre-trial detention in violation of Egyptian law.

Thirty human rights defenders and staff of civil society organizations are under travel bans imposed since President Abdelfattah al-Sisi came to power in 2014; 10 of them have their assets frozen. The state closed the El Nadeem Center for Rehabilitation of Victims of Violence in 2017 and have frozen the assets of seven other Egyptian human rights organizations in the context of a politically motivated court case examining their registration and funding.

ATTEMPTS TO SILENCE PROTESTERS

Here and elsewhere in the region, human rights defenders have acted as a vital check on government excesses, whether exposing abuses by the security forces in the Maghreb, challenging Israel's half-a-century-old military occupation of Palestine territory or speaking truth to power in the Gulf.

As one of the leading voices of a popular movement called HIRAK, Nawal Benaissa has spoken out for social justice and better health care services in the northern Rif region of **Morocco**. Like hundreds of other peaceful protesters in the region, she has been arrested, held in custody and otherwise harassed by the authorities. In February, she was given a 10-month suspended sentence and a fine for "inciting to commit an offence".

In an attempt to silence criticism of the security forces' handling of the HIRAK protests, the authorities have also gone after those defending protesters. In February, human rights lawyer Abdessadak El Bouchattaoui was sentenced to 20 months in prison and a fine of 500 dirhams (around US\$50) after being convicted of charges including "insulting public officials" and "contributing to the organization of an unauthorized and prohibited demonstration". The court used as evidence 114 posts he had published on his personal Facebook account, as well as comments to national media, in which he criticized the use of excessive force against peaceful protesters by security forces and announced he would be taking part in a protest as an observer.

Israel has long displayed brutality against those protesting its military occupation of Palestinian territory and its blockade of the Gaza Strip, a pattern manifested in its lethal response to the Great March of Return, in which the army killed over 150 Palestinian protesters. In some cases, the authorities used military courts to persecute Palestinian human rights defenders. Munther Amira was sentenced to six months in prison in March on charges relating to his peaceful participation in protests. He had been arrested by Israeli soldiers in December 2017 while taking part in a demonstration in Bethlehem calling for the release of activists Ahed and Nariman Tamimi.

The Israeli authorities have displayed a growing intolerance of critical voices more generally. In May, they decided to expel Omar Shakir, Human Rights Watch's Country Director, for allegedly supporting boycotts of Israel. He has challenged the decision and is awaiting a ruling.

Palestinian human rights defenders have also been actively challenging the Ramallah-based **Palestinian government's** sanctions on the Gaza Strip, which is administered by Hamas. Some of them were among dozens of protesters violently dispersed by Palestinian security forces on 14 June. Amnesty International staff member, Laith Abu Zeyad, was one of over 50 demonstrators arrested and beaten in custody.

PROSECUTED FOR SPEAKING OUT

Governments in the Gulf have continued their own attempts to hamstring scrutiny of their actions by criminalizing human rights defenders.

In June a state security court in the **United Arab Emirates** sentenced Ahmed Mansoor, who has been documenting the human rights situation in the country since 2006 and won the Martin Ennals Award for Human Rights Defenders in 2015, to 10 years in prison on charges including “insulting the status and prestige of the UAE and its symbols”. His case is pending before the Federal Supreme Court, his last opportunity to challenge the verdict judicially. His whereabouts are unknown.

In **Bahrain**, Nabeel Rajab had his five-year prison sentence upheld on appeal in June. He had been convicted of “spreading false rumours in time of war”, “insulting public authorities” and “insulting a foreign country” in relation to peaceful comments posted and retweeted on his Twitter account about allegations of torture in Jaw prison and the killing of civilians in the conflict in Yemen by the Saudi Arabia-led coalition.

SHEDDING LIGHT ON ABUSES IN ARMED CONFLICT

In **Yemen** itself, and in other countries where conflict continued to rage, human rights defenders have played a significant role in shedding light on horrendous abuses by all parties and in maintaining international scrutiny of violations. This was illustrated by the campaigning that led to the UN Human Rights Council’s renewal of the mandate of the Group of Eminent Experts in Yemen in September, despite opposition from the Saudi Arabian and Yemeni governments.

As a result, multiple actors to the conflict have subjected human rights defenders to enforced disappearances, arbitrary detentions and death threats – tactics used to intimidate them into silence or into relocating inside or outside the country.

In Hodeidah, human rights defender Kamal al-Shawish was released in September after being arbitrarily detained on the street by Huthi forces and held incommunicado for over a month in an unknown location.

In Ta’iz, Yemeni government authorities and militias have targeted those deemed opposition voices. Akram al-Shawafi, founder of the Watch Team, a human rights monitoring group, was forced to relocate five times during the year as a result of intimidation and online threats after he documented poor treatment of civilians in the city by local authorities. The Watch Team’s office was also raided in July and shut down for a period of two months.

In **Libya**, women human rights defenders have been at the forefront of those speaking out against corruption by officials and abuses by the Libyan National Army and militias. They have faced gender-based violence, as well as smear campaigns on social media.

Mariam al-Tayeb, who has criticized militias responsible for extrajudicial executions, enforced disappearances and torture, has repeatedly received death threats through Facebook as a result of her activism. In January, a militia from the Bab Tajoura district of Tripoli abducted her from her car, held her for two and a half hours and beat her. In February, she fled the country.

Persecution of human rights defenders in both government and rebel-controlled areas has remained endemic in **Syria**. In spite of this and the fact that their colleagues Razan Zaitouneh, Samira Khalil, Wa’el Hamada and Nazem Hamadi (known as the Douma Four) are still missing five years after their abduction, the Violations Documentation Center in Syria is one of a number of organizations continuing to document human rights violations across the country.

In the Syrian diaspora, 2018 saw the rise to prominence of Families for Freedom, a women-led movement of Syrian families working to find and, where possible, obtain the release of all who have been arbitrarily detained or forcibly disappeared by the Syrian government and other parties to the conflict.

Their resilience and courage in the face of the human rights catastrophe that has befallen their country are an inspiration to activists around the globe.

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