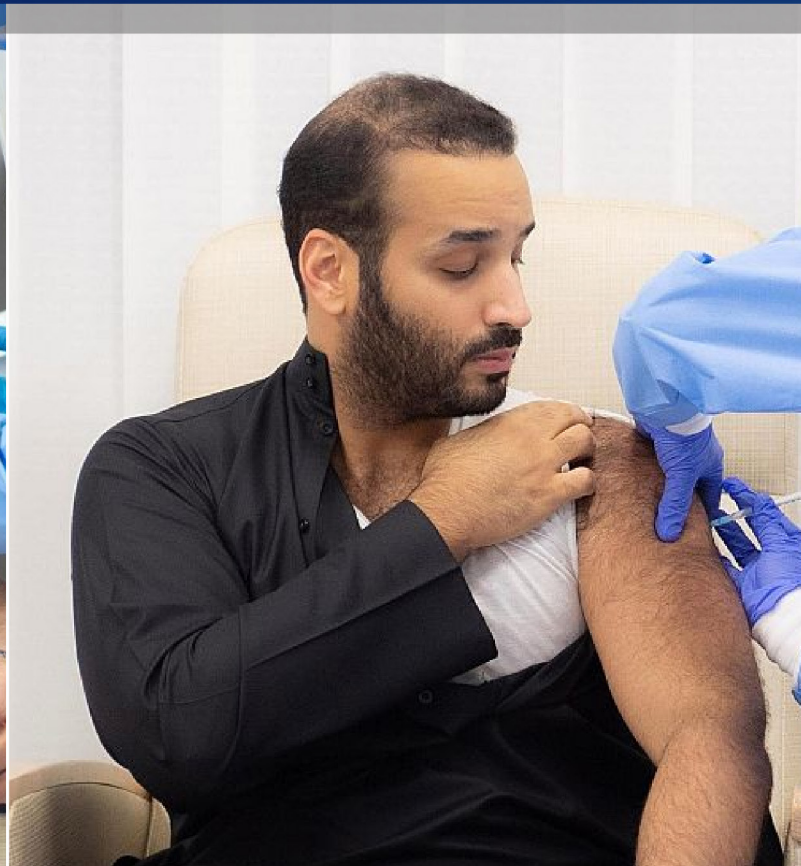


Annual Report 2020

Saudi Arabia: Pandemic of Repression without a Cure



Issued by

The European Saudi Organization for Human Rights

     ESOHumanRights



eshor.org

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Introduction

The year 2020 posed a challenge for all the world's countries as the COVID-19 pandemic dictated policies and priorities. Within the context of the pandemic, international [voices](#) called for the adoption of strong measures to protect human rights and grant greater civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights. However, that did not compel the government of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to respond positively to the human rights issue. Instead, the pandemic opened another new avenue for the government to oppress, persecute, and invent new justifications for greater deprivations and abuse.

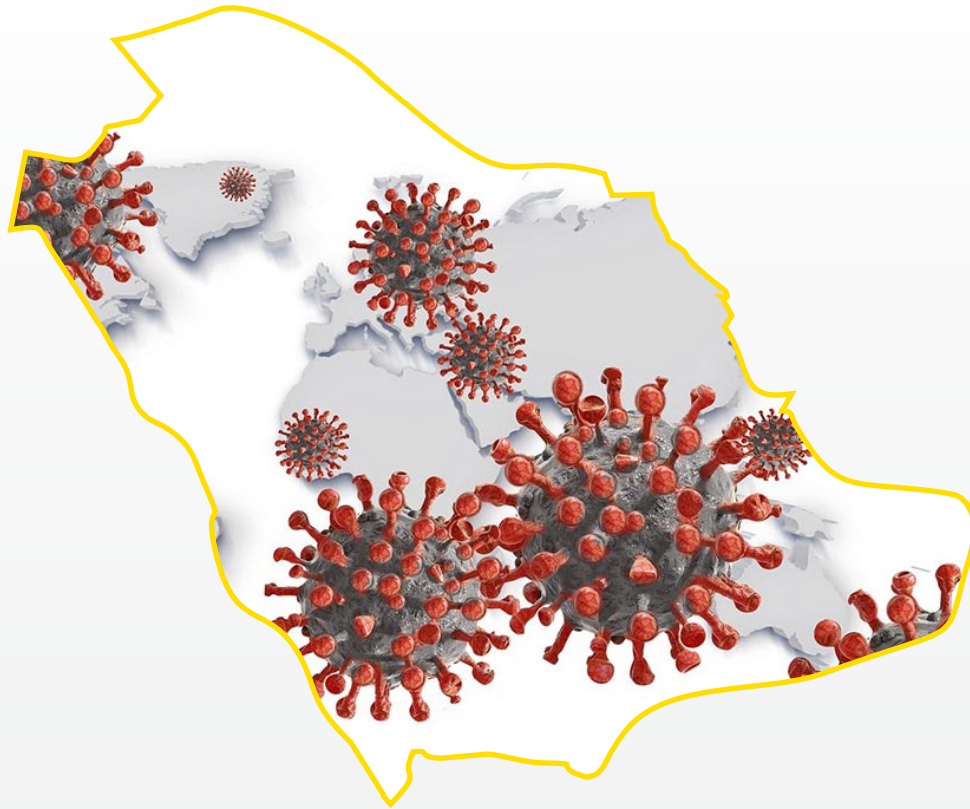
Throughout 2020, no modifications or changes to the state apparatus were introduced that could be seen as contributing to stopping or limiting certain official abuses and crimes, such as the torture freely practiced by the Presidency of State Security. This agency answers directly to the king and is headed by Abdulaziz al-Howairini, who carries out the oppressive wishes of King Salman and his son, Mohammed. Likewise, arbitrary arrests and unfair sentences—including the death

penalty—continued, resulting in forced displacement and persistent unfair treatment of vulnerable groups, such as foreign workers, women, and stateless persons. The lack of an independent judiciary provides fertile soil for ongoing violations, while involvement of the highest state officials in official abuses and crimes deepens the crisis of non-accountability. This state of affairs is encouraging victims to seek out legal remedies abroad.

Of course, despite attempts to deceive the local and international community, Saudi Arabia's flagrant ongoing behavior in covering up violations did not disappear during this year. Its phony speeches and attacks on critics continued, while the lack of confidence in Saudi Arabia's human rights rhetoric became more evident than ever, resulting, in part, in Saudi Arabia's failure to become a member of the Human Rights Council (HRC), where it received the fewest votes among the states that participated in the last elections. Official intransigence and insistence on perpetuating violations—a feature of the Saudi government in recent years—have also not gone away in 2020.

Despite the Saudi government's deception and lack of transparency in handling various violations, the absence of the voices of imprisoned human rights advocates, and the systematic process of intimidation of civil society, ESOHR was able to document some of the Saudi government's violations in 2020. We provide an overview of these in this report, along with some international reactions and stances regarding the deteriorating human rights situation in Saudi Arabia.

14 January 2021

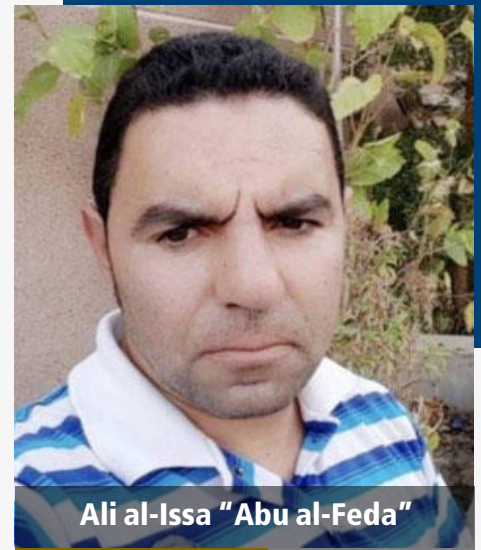


1

Coronavirus pandemic

The Coronavirus pandemic exacerbated the Saudi government's violations of numerous basic rights. Despite UN special rapporteurs' advice to countries not to use pandemic measures for further repression, Saudi Arabia launched a series of arbitrary arrests linked to pandemic actions and reactions.

In addition to the usual arrests carried out on charges related to expression of opinion, a number of people were arrested for expressing their opinion regarding the course of the pandemic. Among the detainees was a social media celebrity, Ali al-Issa, "[Abu al-Feda](#)," who was arrested following his remark in a video clip about store shelves empty of bread as a result of a large number of purchases.

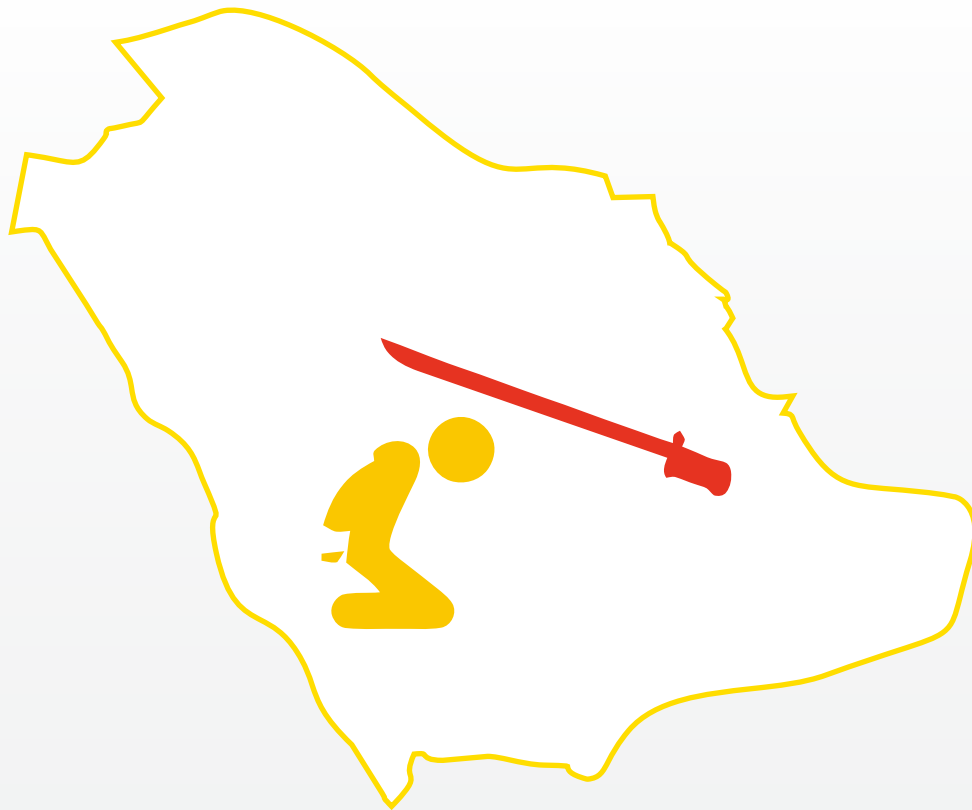


Moreover, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, [Michelle Bachelet](#), warned that COVID-19 has begun to "strike prisons and immigration detention centers, as well as homes for the elderly [and] psychiatric hospitals. It risks rampaging through the extremely vulnerable populations housed in such institutions." While she called for the release of those detained on illegal grounds, the Saudi government did not respond to this call; rather, completely contradictory [violations were observed](#), including the treatment of thousands of Ethiopian migrants detained in Saudi Arabia after they were arrested for crossing the border from Yemen. These migrants were left in appalling conditions: they were packed into prisons in large numbers with no precautions, and COVID-19 spread among them without the necessary medical care, leading to the death of at least three children.



At the level of domestic prisons, ESOHR's sources confirmed the presence of a case inside a political prison, and there are likely more.

Furthermore, the Saudi government took no steps to limit the negative impacts of the measures taken due to the pandemic. When it halted prison visits for months, it did not guarantee any alternative means of communication for the families. On the contrary, the government prevented some detainees from communicating with their families for months, leaving relatives in fear and concern for their well-being and lives.

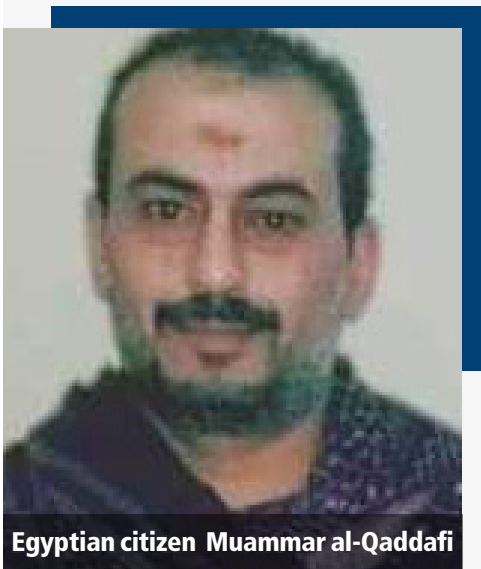
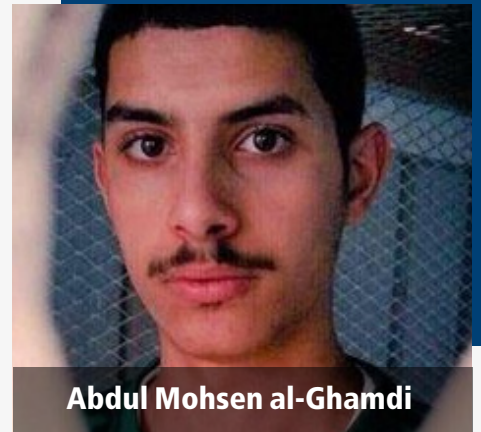


2

Executions

In April 2020, the Saudi government carried out its [800th](#) execution since 2015, the year in which King Salman's reign over the country began. These years saw almost twice as many executions as in the preceding years—evidence of King Salman's bloody rule.

Among those executed in 2020, was a child, [Abdul Mohsen al-Ghamdi](#), who was arrested at the age of 15. The death sentence was carried out despite urgent requests on social media to commute or at least delay it until after the end of the Coronavirus crisis.



Another execution was that of an Egyptian citizen, [Muammar al-Qaddafi](#), who faced drug charges. His case involved numerous violations, including torture and denial of the right to self-defense. Nevertheless, the sentence was carried out, and Saudi Arabia did not hand over his body to his family despite their request for their right to receive the body and bury him in his country.

During 2020, the Saudi government released a number of statements regarding the death penalty, with the official Human Rights Commission publishing a statement in April 2020, discussing a [royal order](#) it said would abolish the death penalty against minors. Four months later, Saudi Arabia announced, in a major propaganda campaign, the beginning of the [retrial of three minors](#): Ali al-Nimr, Dawood al-Marhoon, and Abdullah al-Zahir. **However**, concrete steps did not accompany this announcement. After a time, a trial only for al-Marhoon and al-Zahir began, while the fate of the other minors remains unknown amid fears of government manipulation.

In addition, in June 2020, discussion arose over eliminating [ta'zir \[discretionary\] death sentences](#), upon the recommendation of a member of the Shura Council, whose members are chosen by the government.

However, it is not known how the discussions will proceed nor what will result. Based on what is best for the accused, the government should have issued a public notice suspending all current ta'zir death sentences until the Council of Ministers completes these discussions.

Amid these statements, nearly 40 detainees, most of them political prisoners, remain under threat of execution in various stages of prosecution. ESOHR believes it is likely that this number is far greater, especially if detainees in criminal prisons are taken into account. Among the political detainees threatened with execution are Sheikh [Salman al-Ouda](#), researcher [Hassan al-Maliki](#), and protestor [Ali Al Rabie](#), who face death on a mix of charges, mostly related to expression of opinions.

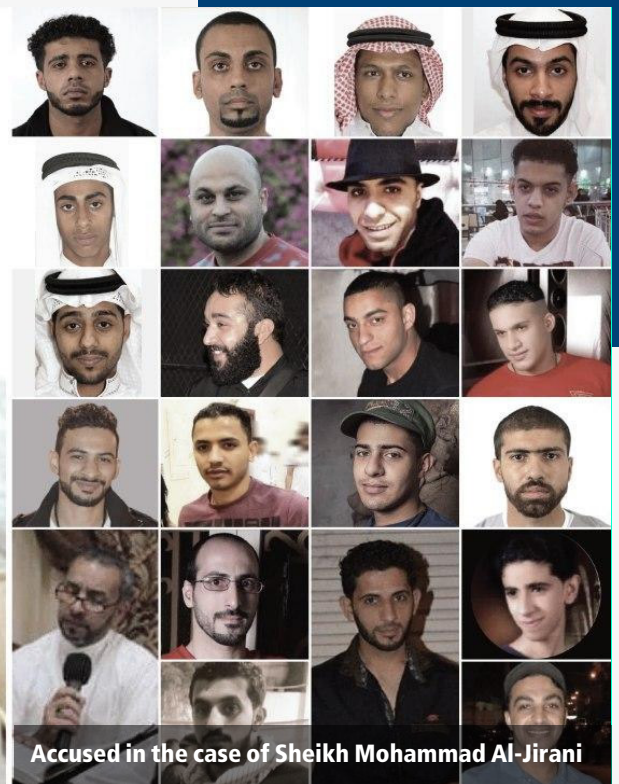


Among the people threatened with execution are the demonstrators Ali Al Rabie', Hassan al-Maliki and Sheikh Salman al-Awda

In many cases, arbitrary death sentences are based on retaliatory and arbitrary practices. According to ESOHR's monitoring, several young men face the risk of execution on charges related to a single incident. Since December 2016, Saudi Arabia has taken actions affecting 22 people, from arrest to trial to execution, against the backdrop of the killing of Sheikh Mohammed al-Jirani, despite the questions surrounding the case. **In a [report it issued](#),** ESOHR noted that the Saudi government invokes this case to justify the liquidation of wanted persons and the killing of detainees. This is clear in the expanded accusations against many of committing the same crime without an explanation of their roles, with some exceptions. The government's procedures cannot be trusted without an independent judiciary.



Sheikh Mohammed al-Jirani

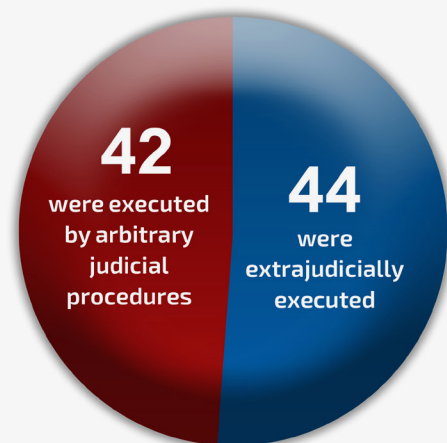
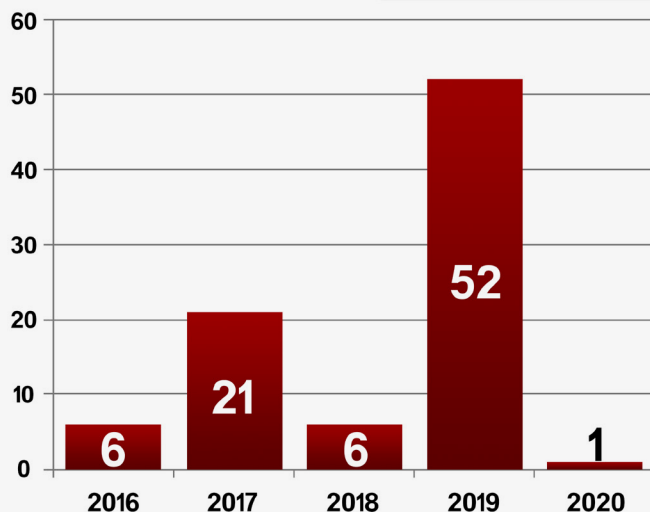


Accused in the case of Sheikh Mohammad Al-Jirani

While the lives of many remain in danger, and amid numerous indications that Saudi Arabia is proceeding to issue and carry out “political executions,” it continues to refuse to hand over the bodies of those it put to death or killed extrajudicially, despite demands from many families. According to ESOHR monitoring, Saudi Arabia has withheld **86 bodies** of victims of executions or extrajudicial killing, including some who were minors when arrested or charged.

86 bodies are being held in Saudi Arabia

During the reign of King Salman



83 Saudi 2 Bahraini 1 Egyptian



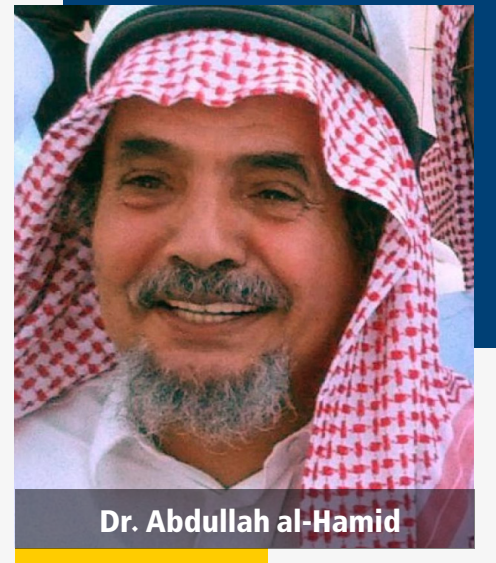
3

Prison conditions and torture

During 2020, ESOHR monitored the ongoing violations inside prisons, from torture and neglect to death under mysterious circumstances.

In April 2020, human rights advocate [Abdullah al-Hamid](#) died after deliberate medical neglect. Reports indicated, that on 9 April 2020, after suffering a stroke and falling into a coma, al-Hamid (born on 12 July 1950) was transferred from Hair Prison in Riyadh, where he had been detained since 2013, to the intensive care unit of a hospital outside the prison.

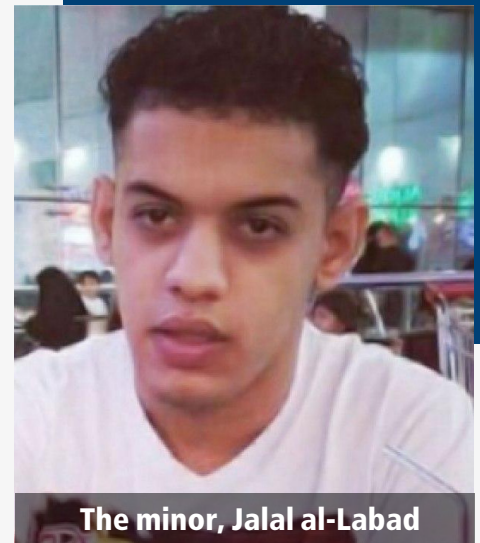
Al-Hamid's health was deteriorating, and he was transferred to the hospital more than three months ago. A doctor informed him at the time of his urgent need to undergo heart catheterization. **Despite this**, the Saudi government returned him to the prison in poor health and subjected him to major psychological pressure by often depriving him of communications and visits. Al-Hamid was not allowed to inform his family or anyone outside the prison of his medical condition. In a UN letter, special rapporteurs called on Saudi Arabia to investigate the circumstances of al-Hamid's death. Saudi Arabia responded to the letter with false information, and the country has no independent judicial structure by which to investigate the circumstances surrounding his death.



In July 2020, the journalist, [Saleh al-Shehi](#), died after he was unexpectedly released despite not completing the term of his unjust sentence. Reports circulated that he was released from prison in poor health, and his death raised questions about what he suffered inside the prison at a time when there is no independent judiciary and families are afraid to speak.

ESOHR previously documented [21 cases](#) of deaths connected to prisons, whether deaths from various causes inside prisons, including the likelihood of torture with its marks visible on the bodies of some, or deaths after release due to deteriorating health caused by prison conditions. These deaths confirm the poor treatment inside prisons.

ESOHR has documented the torture methods used in prisons by reviewing [110 cases](#) of arbitrary detention. The documentation showed the systematic practice of torture and the failure to investigate it, as well as the handing down of arbitrary sentences based on confessions extracted under torture, as in the case of the minor, [Jalal al-Labad](#), who was sentenced to death.



The minor, Jalal al-Labad

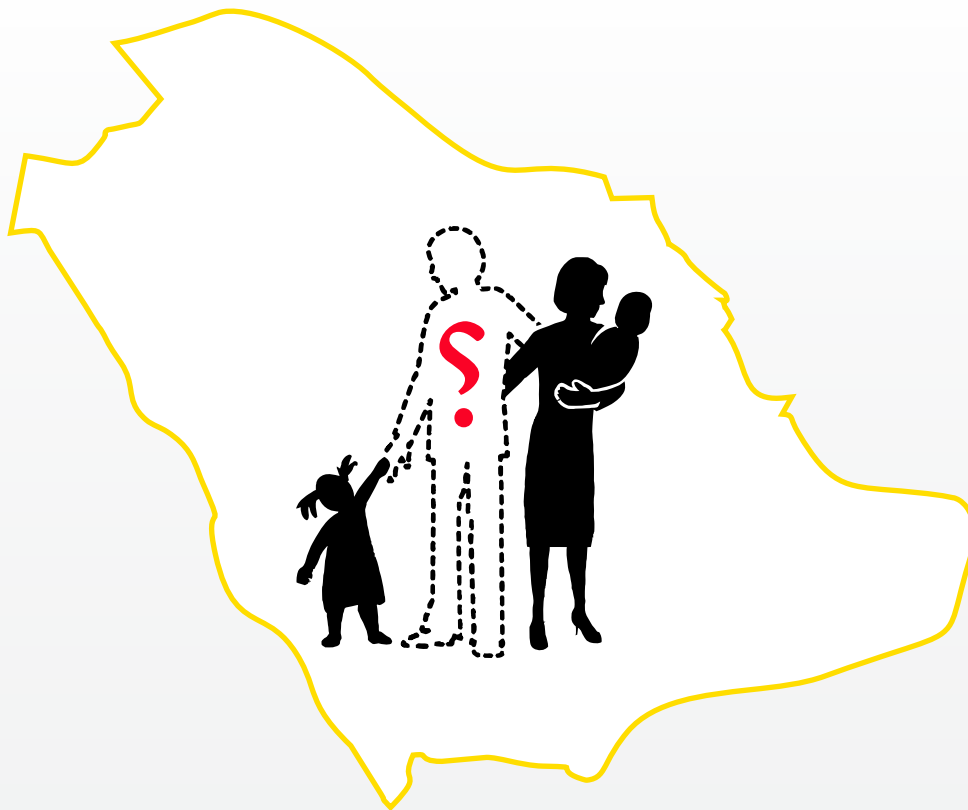
Death cases related to prison conditions in Saudi Arabia



At least 21 detainees died as a result of Saudi prison conditions, most of them during the reign of King Salman and his son:

- 6 in Dammam detective prison
- 3 in Taroot police centr
- 1 in al-Awameyah police center
- 1 in Dammam general prison
- 1 in Moliz prison on Riyadh
- 1 in Haer prison in Riyadh
- 2 in Dahban prison on Geddah (including 1 woman)
- 1 in Tarafiyeh prison in Qasim
- 1 in Sakaka prison in al-Gawf

Update
29/07/2020



4

Enforced disappearance

During 2020, the Saudi government continued to practice [enforced disappearance](#) against numerous arbitrary detainees. According to ESOHR, the use of enforced disappearance varies widely: it may occur during the investigation period or for days or months; in some cases, the period of disappearance may be prolonged such that the government denies it has the person in custody. According to ESOHR documentation, at least five people are still in a state of enforced disappearance, and the number is likely higher.

Among those forcibly disappeared, whose cases ESOHR has [monitored](#), are Ahmed al-Mughassil, [Suleiman al-Dawish](#), Mohammed Al Ummar, Mohammed al-Imam, and [Abdul Rahman al-Sadhan](#). Many reasons suggest the likelihood that the number is greater than these five cases.



Numerous violations and crimes pervade enforced disappearance. The al-Sadhan family has confirmed their knowledge, through private sources, that their son was subjected to torture. Disappearance paves the way not only for torture but also for other violations, including unfair trials that may result in execution.

ESOHR previously documented the case of [Sheikh Samir al-Hilal](#), who was subjected to enforced disappearance for years. Currently, four years after his arrest, he remains deprived of his right to visit or appoint a lawyer, with reports indicating that a secret trial has begun.





5

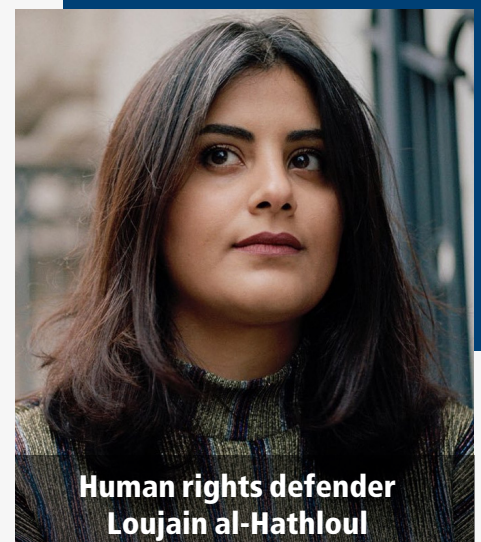
Women's rights

Throughout 2020, in line with the years in which Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman assumed power, the Saudi government continued to issue promises regarding women's rights and to use this issue to promote reforms. At the same time, in its entire history Saudi Arabia has not seen a persecution of women as severe as that witnessed in the recent years of torture and arbitrary detention.

At the legal level, due to various pressures and Saudi Arabia's desire for media plaudits, the government corrected some of these issues, including giving women the right to register the birth of their children in civil status situations, which was previously unavailable to them, and the right to move and travel without a man, in addition to appointing some women to senior positions.

These changes have not deterred Saudi Arabia from completely contradictory practices, such as arresting the most prominent women's rights advocates, and the country continues to expand the detention of women. According to ESOHR statistics, Saudi Arabia has arrested at least 101 women in recent years, 53 of whom are still in prison. So far, the trial of eight women is ongoing after their temporary release. Saudi Arabia has arbitrarily arrested 11 women during 2020, according to ESOHR statistics,

Saudi Arabia has ignored and disavowed complaints of torture and ill treatment, confirming that this is ordered from above. Loujain al-Hathloul submitted an official complaint of torture, which [official authorities disavowed](#) by denying she was tortured. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia continues to abuse female detainees in prison, which led al-Hathloul to declare a hunger strike because she was prevented from communicating with her family.



Human rights defender
Loujain al-Hathloul

The Saudi government also continues to delay the cases of women activists and human rights advocates for years after their arrests.

After more than two years of detention, Loujain al-Hathloul was transferred to the Specialized Criminal Court for terrorism cases after being transferred first to the Criminal Court for the first hearing of her trial and transferred again to the terrorism court after the second hearing. This demonstrates the disarray and confusion in handling al-Hathloul's case due to her insistence on disclosing the crimes and violations against her

On 28 December 2020, she [received](#) an unfair preliminary sentence of five years and eight months in prison, with two years and ten months suspended. Human rights advocate Maya al-Zahrani received a [similar sentence](#). Other similar rulings were also issued, the sources of which were not definitively confirmed. The charges against the activists have nothing to do with crimes. They include writing human rights reports and communicating with human rights organizations and activists, which are not classified as crimes.

Alongside the official violations against women activists and human rights advocates in prison and court, the protection of women [from violence](#) remains ineffective in Saudi Arabia.

Despite the government's promotion of laws to protect women and children from violence, women remain vulnerable to violence, in some cases leading to their death. For several reasons, there is a lack of confidence in official authorities to provide protection for

battered women: victims' fear of being confined in shelters, lack of confidence in the commitment of the official apparatus to hold abusers accountable, complexity of reporting procedures, and alignment of officials with the perpetrator except in cases that receive media attention and publicity for victims of violence on social media.

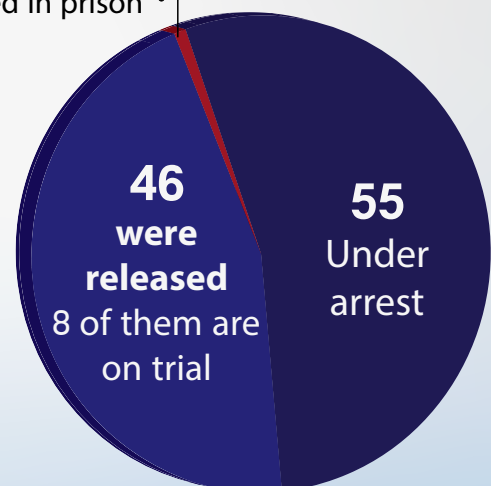
ESOHR documented the [case of four](#) Yemeni sisters, in which official Saudi authorities clearly disregarded and failed to seriously engage with their claims of violence. After detaining them in a shelter, Saudi authorities deported the four sisters despite fears for their lives from their father's abuse.

102 women arrested by Saudi Arabia on the last years

Most of them are still under arbitrary detention

- 89** of the Saudi nationality
- 13** distributed over different nationalities
- 1** at least was minor
- 2** At least were arrested pregnant and delivered their babies in prison

1 died in prison





6

Foreign workers

The Saudi government placed thousands of Ethiopian migrants in inhumane detention centers and treated them in a humiliating and degrading manner that led to the [outbreak of a number](#) of diseases and illnesses, including COVID-19. This resulted in the death of several, including at least 3 children, prompting the European Parliament to [issue a resolution](#) calling on Saudi Arabia to stop the persecution and allow international observers to enter.

Likewise, UN rapporteurs raised [fears](#) of the Saudi government facilitating human trafficking via mobile apps that allow users to participate in buying and selling domestic workers.

Special rapporteurs noted that Saudi Arabia [continues](#) to foster an environment conducive to violations of human rights and labor standards that may amount to modern forms of slavery. The rapporteurs expressed their overall concern regarding workers' living working conditions, as well as their particular concern for the facilitation of human rights violations via internet apps.



Human rights reports have previously considered that the [kafala system](#) may be a form of modern slavery. Having received numerous criticisms, Saudi Arabia announced, in November 2020, amendments to the kafala system that will take effect in the second quarter of 2021.

The Saudi government is promoting the amendments—allowing foreign workers to travel and move from one job to another without informing the sponsor—as reforms leading to the end of the kafala system. However, the true picture does not line up with the official promotion, which was ambiguous, thus raising concerns about the ability of these amendments to effectively protect foreign workers and improve their status. The amendments require the worker to adhere to certain procedures when leaving Saudi Arabia and link changing employers with the approval of the authorities. This severely restricts the ability of these amendments to improve the situation of foreign workers and excludes the workers most in need of protection and most vulnerable to persecution, such as domestic and farm workers.



7

Forced displacement

Throughout 2020, the Saudi government continued to practice forced displacement, which is categorized as a gross violation of human rights under international law. Three years after the displacement of residents of the [Masura neighborhood](#) in the city of Awamiyah, a series of forced displacement operations continued in disparate locations, including the displacement of the people of al-Khuraybah in northwest Saudi Arabia, where the NEOM project led to the displacement of thousands of indigenous members of the [Howeitah tribe](#).

Saudi Arabia violated several laws governing the process of removal, including the use of force and weapons against protestors and the killing of a citizen, [Abdul-Rahim al-Howeiti](#), who opposed the process of forced displacement, as well as the [arrest](#) of several tribe members, including Mrs. Halima al-Howeiti.



Abdul-Rahim al-Howeiti



نيوم NEOM

NEOM project logo

These violations prompted 11 NGO's, including ESOHR, to send an open letter to Western management consulting companies, asking them to end their participation in the NEOM project due to grave human rights violations.

Along with the displacement of the people of al-Khuraybah, forced displacement operations also affected residents of the village of Tharbah in the governorate of Al-Ula, where the government demolished several homes. Activists circulated videos on social media showing the rejection and anger of the residents vis-à-vis the demolition operations. The activists made clear that most of the owners of the houses being destroyed had no other shelter and demanded a halt to the demolitions. **Furthermore**, according to ESOHR monitoring, the groups [most affected](#) by such clearance operations live in villages and remote areas in Tabuk and are engaged in herding and agriculture or are minor government employees, which exacerbates the crisis. For the most part, those affected by forced displacement are the poorest and most needy groups, especially the children of [stateless individuals](#).



8

The UN and human rights mechanisms

In 2020, despite the limited competition within its geographic division for membership in the HRC (five countries competing for four seats), and the political support it usually receives due to economic interests, Saudi Arabia failed to gain membership on the Council for the 2021-2023 term.

UN member nations failed to vote for Saudi Arabia, thus confirming the degree of discontent with Saudi Arabia's practices, especially the war in Yemen. This dissatisfaction can also be seen in the increasing criticisms in recent years following the country's political executions of adults and children, its ongoing detention and torture of women human rights advocates, and its policy of impunity, especially in the case of the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi.

Besides failing to gain membership on the HRC, Saudi Arabia received much criticism from member nations of the Council during its three regular sessions in 2020. [Saudi Arabia attacked](#) its critics without offering acceptable arguments.

For the third time in two years, a statement was issued condemning Saudi's practices, signed by [29 nations](#) during the 45th session of the HRC, calling for the release of political prisoners.



Human rights mechanisms also criticized Saudi Arabia in 2020, via numerous statements, reports, and resolutions.

UN special rapporteurs sent several letters to the Saudi government. On 22 January 2020, special rapporteurs expressed their [strong concern](#) over reports of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's violation of international human rights standards by deploying a digital program with the goal of spying on the owner of the Washington Post and CEO of Amazon, Jeff Bezos.



Jeff Bezos - CEO of Amazon



The lawyer and human rights defender Waleed abu al-Khair

On 25 February 2020, UN special rapporteurs renewed their calls on the Saudi government to release [Waleed Abu al-Khair](#), noting in [their letter](#) his subjection to serious human rights violations, including his right to a fair trial, to not be arbitrarily detained, and to be protected from torture.

On 28 February 2020, the UN Committee to Eliminate Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) issued a statement expressing its concern over the [status of women human rights advocates](#) and urging the government to release human rights advocate Loujain al-Hathloul from her prolonged pre-trial detention and guarantee her right to a fair trial without further delay.

On 14 February 2020, the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention issued an [opinion](#) declaring the detention of Issa al-Nukheifi, Abdulaziz al-Shubaili, and Issa al-Hamid to be [illegal](#). The group called on Saudi Arabia to take the necessary steps to immediately correct their situation to conform with the relevant international standards.

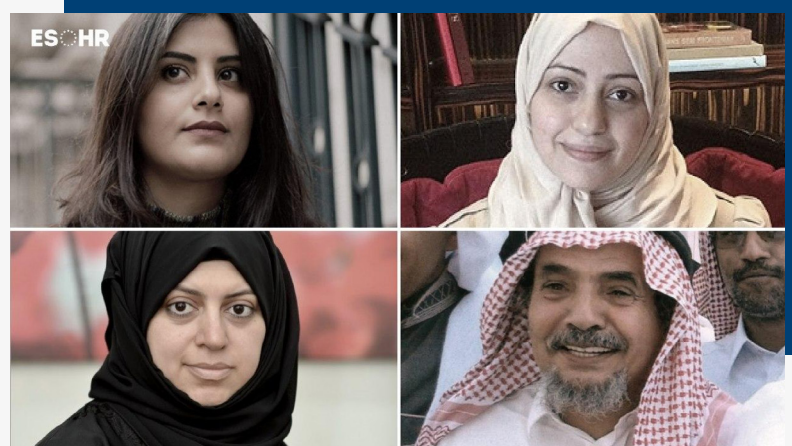
On 6 April 2020, UN special rapporteurs sent a [letter](#) to Saudi Arabia regarding possible human rights violations suffered by Princess Basmah bint Saudi Abdulaziz and her daughter, Suhoud al-Sharif.



Princess Basmah bint Saudi Abdulaziz

On 2 May 2020, UN special rapporteurs [expressed](#) their concern over the measures Saudi Arabia had taken to limit the spread of COVID-19, which were not extensive enough to protect detainees and were too limited and ineffective. Combined with the poor conditions in prisons, the lives of detainees could be at risk, including those detained for exercising legal rights and freedoms.

The letter demanded an explanation of the circumstances surrounding the death of Dr. Abdullah Al-Hamid and the release of detained women human rights advocates.



Human rights defenders (Samar Badawi, Loujain Al-Hathloul, Abdullah Al-Hamed, Nasima Al-Sada)

On 11 May 2020, UN special rapporteurs sent a [letter](#) to Saudi Arabia regarding the detention and ill treatment suffered by Sheikh Mohammed al-Habib and Murtaja Qureiris.



Sheikh Mohammed al-Habib and Murtaja Qureiris

On 22 May 2020, UN special rapporteurs raised [fears](#) over Saudi Arabia's failure to publish the text of the royal order that the Human Rights Commission said [protects minors](#) from the death penalty. They stressed that this led to uncertainty regarding the seriousness of the resolution and whether it contains exceptions.

In a statement, the Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders, Mary Lawlor, called on Saudi Arabia to immediately and unconditionally release women human rights advocates, saying the longer they are held in prison, the worse it looks for the Saudi government. In a [statement](#) issued on 2 June 2020, coinciding with reports of the lack of information on the whereabouts of activist Loujain al-Hathloul, Lawlor said that women human rights advocates are inspirational figures to all human rights advocates everywhere. The special rapporteur added that they give strength even while in prison.



Marie Lawlor - Special Rapporteur on human rights defenders

On 19 June 2020, UN special rapporteurs [raised](#) the [issue](#) of Saudi Arabia facilitating the enslavement and trafficking of human beings through apps used on smart devices. The special rapporteurs noted that Saudi Arabia continues to create an environment conducive to violations of human rights and labor standards, which may amount to modern forms of slavery.

On 25 June 2020, the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention at the UN issued an [official opinion](#) that Saudi Arabia's detention of human rights advocate Loujain al-Hathloul is illegal and arbitrary according to international human rights law. The Working Group called on Saudi Arabia to quickly release her and compensate her for her illegal detention.

On 14 September 2020, [during a speech](#) on human rights developments in the world, under Item 2 of the 45th session of the HRC, the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, expressed her "deep" concern about the continuing arbitrary detention of women human rights advocates in Saudi Arabia and called for their immediate release.



Michelle Bachelet - the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights

In a statement on November 5, 2020, [CEDAW called](#) for the immediate release of women human rights advocates and detainees held in Saudi Arabia and expressed concern for the deteriorating health of Loujain Al-Hathloul, who had been on a hunger strike in protest of her ill treatment since 26 October 2020.



9

Official concealment of violations

Throughout 2020, the Saudi government activated the role of official rights organization with the goal of concealing its violations and crimes.

In front of the HRC, the Saudi delegation continued to try to deceive via reports that did not reflect reality, in which it discussed bogus achievements in various areas, including [women's rights](#), the [elderly](#), housing, and so on. The delegation also [attacked](#) nations and [special](#)

[rapporteurs](#) who criticized its violations.

On the domestic front, the official Human Rights Commission, which reports directly to King Salman, promoted changes at various levels, most notably the death penalty. **In April 2020**, the commission directly published a royal order ending death sentences against minors.

Its version contained several exceptions, and no other official copy was published. This created ambiguity surrounding the measure, prompting the commission to [clarify the decision](#) by saying that it includes all minors without exception. Its representatives reiterated this in front of many parties, but fears of manipulation



and exceptions remained because of the failure to formally publish the text of the royal order, as well as in light of previous disrespect for laws issued or promises, including the execution of a young man, [Hayder al-Leif](#), after Saudi Arabia told UN special rapporteurs he had been sentenced to imprisonment.

[Awwad Alawwad](#), the president of the Saudi Human Rights Commission, also promoted changes in women's rights while speaking of 20 various reforms in the field of women's rights and empowerment achieved over the last few years under the direction of the King and the supervision of the Crown Prince.

Alawwad passed over the formal complaints to the commission from detained women activists subjected to torture, as well as the various types of suffering experienced by women in Saudi Arabia. Talking about these issues inside the country poses a danger of arrest, whether the speaker is a woman or a man.



10

Remedies to hold violators accountable

During 2020, there was no improvement in the independence of the judiciary to guarantee victims of human rights violations access to remedies. The judiciary remains under the control of the decision-makers, consisting of King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammed and their associates. This belies the independence that government discourse is constantly mouthing.

In the case of the killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, Saudi Arabia tried to close the case and give the illusion of the existence of an objective and independent judiciary by issuing rulings described by UN special rapporteurs as [unlawful](#), especially as they did not hold accountable those actually responsible for the crime. There is no possibility within the country to investigate Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who, with his father, is in complete control of all state institutions, thus demonstrating the lack of an environment that provides means of accountability.



Journalist Jamal Khashoggi

Furthermore, the intimidation the Saudi government practices, and the tales of retaliation that spread locally to those demanding justice for the violations against them, may seriously prevent families from demanding justice. **Among** the evidences for this is the Saudi government's extrajudicial killing of [eight young men](#) and the inability



From the right: Ahmed al-Faraj, Muhammad al-Nimir, Fahd al-Rabah, Aqeel Nabil al-Jawhar, Hadi al-Faraj, Hassan Abdullah al-Nimir, Ali Abdullah al-Nimir, Muhammad Abu Kabous

of their families to even demand an investigation, as well as their fear of claiming their bodies even a year after they were killed.

The continuing violations in prisons, along with arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances, cruel and unjust sentences, arbitrary killings, and many other violations, have prompted victims to seek other remedies.

On World Human Rights Day, ESOHR held a [conference](#), in which a number of victims, their families, or those expressing their suffering participated, along with specialist international lawyers.

The conference discussed the violations of the Saudi government and ways to hold accountable violators of international law. Lawyers, who presented their experiences and summaries of their studies and monitoring, stressed that the world is moving towards finding legal means of redress through penal laws that have become recognized in a number of countries, such as European countries and Canada. The lawyers indicated that direct and indirect officials could be prosecuted in cases like torture, deprivation of life, and enslavement, if documented properly.



The participants (first conference for victims of Saudi violations)

Conclusion

In its 2020 Annual Report on the status of human rights in Saudi Arabia, ESOHR has attempted to present a picture of the reality of human rights in the country. However, in light of the difficulty of accessing information—a result of the widespread intimidation, repression, and targeting of the country’s civil society—and the lack of transparency, the picture we have presented is partial and does not reflect the most painful reality.

The monitoring and documentation presented in the 2020 Report show that the factors governing the human rights situation in Saudi Arabia boil down to political calculation and foreign influence. This is not sufficient to bring about real changes in human rights. As far as the political mood directly related to King Salman and his son Mohammed, human rights are not a desirable issue, and those who exercise freedoms or demand rights are easily targeted through the stigma of terrorism, security destabilization, and other clichéd terms. Accordingly, the Saudi government has classified those who demand rights and reforms as enemies, traitors, and terrorists.

Aside from political calculation, the foreign factor, which operates through political entities, media, and NGO’s, is the other factor that helped shape the human rights scene in 2020. ESOHR believes that the foreign factor and the light shed on certain cases contributed to the Saudi government taking some measures or making statements or decisions, including things that are limited or misleading. Although these changes are preferable to the deterioration seen in previous years on such issues as the death penalty or some aspects of women’s rights—all the while confirming that some women’s rights have worsened, especially the

bold and unprecedented oppression of arbitrary arrest and torture—these changes also come with complete disregard of other issues, compounded by limited means of documentation and monitoring.

The factors that defined the human rights scene in 2020, were accompanied by direct targeting of civil society and everyone who expressed an opinion contrary to the government, in the form of arbitrary and indiscriminate detention, use of force, and extrajudicial killing. Because of ill treatment or torture, it can be said that Saudi Arabia, in 2020, has succeeded in raising the level of intimidation and widening the scope of fear domestically with the goal of stopping or curbing demands for individual and collective rights. This was achieved primarily through a systematic plan directed by the Presidency of the State Security, which answers directly to King Salman.

Amid the absence of new factors, the hostility to human rights that characterizes the political calculation, and the ongoing absence, alienation, and suppression of civil society, ESOHR sees no signs for optimism that 2021 will be better than 2020, except for the popular will domestically and abroad.


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Saudi Arabia: Pandemic of Repression without a Cure



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