

Saudi Arabia 2023 Human Rights Report

Executive Summary

There were no significant changes to the human rights situation in Saudi Arabia during the year.

Significant human rights issues included credible reports of: arbitrary or unlawful killings, including extrajudicial killings; enforced disappearance; torture and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment by government agents; harsh and life-threatening prison conditions; arbitrary arrest and detention; serious problems with the independence of the judiciary; political prisoners or detainees; transnational repression against individuals in another country; arbitrary or unlawful interference with privacy; punishment of family members for alleged offenses by a relative; serious restrictions on freedom of expression and media freedom, including violence or threats of violence against journalists, unjustified arrests or prosecutions of journalists, and censorship; serious restrictions on internet freedom; substantial interference with the freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of association, including overly restrictive laws on the organization, funding, or operation of nongovernmental and civil society organizations; restrictions of religious freedom; restrictions on freedom of movement and residence within the territory of a state and on the right to leave the country; refoulement of refugees to a country where they would

face torture or persecution; inability of citizens to change their government peacefully through free and fair elections; serious and unreasonable restrictions on political participation; serious government restrictions on domestic and international human rights organizations; crimes involving violence or threats of violence targeting migrants and refugees, especially of Ethiopian origin; laws criminalizing consensual same-sex sexual conduct between adults which were not enforced; crimes involving violence or threats of violence targeting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or intersex persons; and prohibiting independent trade unions or significant restrictions on workers' freedom of association.

In several cases, the government did not investigate, prosecute, or punish officials accused of committing human rights abuses, contributing to an environment of impunity.

Section 1. Respect for the Integrity of the Person

a. Arbitrary Deprivation of Life and Other Unlawful or Politically Motivated Killings

There were numerous reports that the government or its agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings, including extrajudicial killings, during the year.

The law permitted capital punishment for a range of nonviolent offenses, including apostasy, "sorcery," and adultery, although death sentences for

such practices were rare and usually reduced on appeal. Capital punishment could also be imposed for nonviolent terrorism-related offenses, and authorities carried out multiple executions for such crimes. Individuals convicted of *qisas*, a category of crimes that included various types of murder, or *hudud*, crimes carrying specific penalties under the country's interpretation of Islamic law, still faced the death penalty even if the crimes were committed when they were children, and there were instances when offenders were sentenced to be executed for actions possibly taken as a child. On February 16, UN experts sent a letter calling on the government to stop all death sentences against individuals facing charges that occurred before they reached age 18, according to the European-Saudi Organization for Human Rights (ESOHR).

According to human rights organizations, members of the Shia minority and members of the Huwaitat tribe were disproportionately sentenced to death.

On July 21, ESOHR reported the country executed 61 persons in the first half of the year. On December 21, ESOHR reported the country executed 14 individuals in September, including two citizens with unclear charges, described as rare military verdicts.

There were numerous abuses similar to the following examples.

On March 12, authorities executed Jordanian citizen Hussein Abu al-Khair after his conviction for drug smuggling, according to Human Rights Watch (HRW). Abu al-Khair was arrested in 2014 and sentenced to death in 2015

after what Amnesty International and the United Kingdom-based human rights organization ALQST for Human Rights (ALQST) called a “grossly” unfair trial.

On May 29, authorities executed Bahraini citizens Jaafar Sultan and Sadiq Thamer following what Amnesty International described as a “grossly unfair trial” on terrorism-related charges. HRW stated it was unlikely, based on documented longstanding violations of due process and fair trial rights in the country’s criminal justice system, that Sultan and Thamer received a fair trial leading up to their execution. Their executions were carried out despite multiple calls by UN Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary, or Arbitrary Executions Morris Tidball-Binz for a retrial in conformity with international law.

According to a May report by Amnesty International, recorded executions tripled from 65 in 2021 to 196 in 2022, the highest number the organization recorded in the country in 30 years. According to the report, the Saudi Human Rights Commission informed Amnesty that of the 196 individuals executed in 2022, 85 were convicted of “terrorism”-related offenses and 57 of drug-related offenses. The Saudi Press Agency, the government’s official news agency, officially published details of the executions of only 148 persons in 2022 based on announcements by the Ministry of Interior. Amnesty International’s report noted the difference in numbers of executions, which raised serious concern regarding the government’s transparency with respect to the death penalty.

On January 31, Reprieve and ESOHR released a report on the use of the death penalty in the country from 2010 to 2022. According to the report, ESOHR investigations found fair trial violations and torture were endemic in death penalty cases, including cases of child defendants. ESOHR investigations also found names of executed individuals for whom there were no public records of their being imprisoned, charged, or sentenced to death. Additionally, the report found the country still regularly executed child defendants and sentenced child defendants to death, despite the government's public commitment that it had ended this practice. The report asserted that the country disproportionately executed foreign nationals, including high numbers of women domestic workers and low-level drug offenders, and that the resumption of executions for drug offenses in November 2022 nullified a stated moratorium on executions for drug offenses. According to Reprieve, the death penalty was routinely used for nonlethal offenses and to silence dissidents and protesters.

An August 21 HRW report found that Saudi security forces on the border with Yemen killed at least 650 Ethiopian migrants and asylum seekers who tried to cross the border between March 2022 and June 2023.

b. Disappearance

There were numerous credible reports of enforced disappearances carried out by or on behalf of government authorities. The government did not make efforts to prevent, investigate, and punish such acts. On September

19, Right Livelihood, ALQST, and MENA Rights Group issued a statement during the 54th session of the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva calling for the government to end the widespread and increasingly frequent practice of enforced disappearances as part of authorities' extreme repression of peaceful dissent, made possible by a lack of criminalization of the practice, and often coupled with torture.

There were numerous abuses similar to the following examples.

On July 25, international media reported graduate student Mohammed Matar al-Shalawi went missing after flying from Australia to Saudi Arabia to visit his family in April after the family urgently called on him to come home. Al-Shalawi recorded a final video message before leaving Australia. "If you are watching this recording, then the Saudi authorities have arrested me two or three months ago for charges related to freedom of expression," he said in the video. Al-Shalawi reportedly feared he would be targeted after expressing his opinions on the government while in Australia, and after his brother was arrested due to text messages they had exchanged on the same subject.

As of June, the whereabouts of Yemeni human rights activist Samira al-Houri, arrested in Riyadh in April 2022, remained unknown, according to *The Guardian* newspaper and Sanad.

There were some updates during the year on previous disappearances. On January 8, the account on X (formerly known as Twitter) of Prisoners of

Conscience affirmed that authorities released academic Sami al-Majid, who had been detained since 2017 and held without charge.

c. Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, and Other Related Abuses

The law officially prohibited torture and made officers responsible for criminal investigations liable for any abuse of authority. Sharia law, as interpreted by officials and judges, prohibited judges from accepting confessions obtained under duress, and the law stated public investigators should not subject accused persons to coercive measures to influence their testimony. Nevertheless, there were numerous credible reports by human rights organizations, the United Nations, and independent third parties of torture and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment by government officials and law enforcement officers, and of defendants' confessions being obtained through torture or other mistreatment.

On January 10, a joint statement by 10 nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) — including HRW, Amnesty International, and Reprieve — stated human rights activists, writers, academics, and intellectual reformers in the country were increasingly targeted and subjected to harassment, smear campaigns, surveillance, arbitrary detention, torture, and enforced disappearances. On June 26, ALQST contended on X that the country systematically had practiced torture in a climate of impunity for years. Also on June 26, ESOHR claimed government authorities and institutions used

torture systematically during all stages of detention, from arrest to after the issuance of the verdict.

There were numerous allegations of torture similar to the following examples.

On February 6, ESOHR reported Ali Mohamed al-Rebea and Ali Hassan al-Safwani were tortured and abused after their arrest on charges of membership in a terrorist organization, supporting terrorist ideology, and providing material support to terrorists. According to ESOHR, the men were forced to sign confessions, denied access to a lawyer during the investigation period, and deprived of their fundamental rights.

On February 21, ESOHR reported Mohamed Abdullah al-Faraj was tortured by beating and handcuffing and denied necessary medical treatment. In November 2022, the Specialized Criminal Court (SCC) sentenced al-Faraj to death on charges including insulting the royal family by chanting offensive slogans during demonstrations and gatherings.

Courts periodically sentenced individuals to corporal punishment, although there were no reports of flogging since a 2020 royal decree prohibiting the practice except in cases of drunkenness, sexual conduct between unmarried persons, and false accusations of adultery.

Impunity for security forces remained a serious problem. The Public Prosecutor's Office, which reported to the king, was responsible for

investigating whether security force actions were justifiable and pursuing prosecutions. There were reports of abuses during interrogations despite the presence of surveillance cameras in Ministry of Interior criminal investigation offices to record suspects' interrogations; there were no reports such video monitoring led to accountability for abuses. The government provided human rights training to security forces, but NGOs highlighted concerns regarding widespread torture and other abuses as well as deplorable conditions in detention centers.

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

Prison conditions were harsh and life threatening due to deaths caused by medical neglect. NGOs stated prison and detention center conditions reportedly failed to meet international standards; other problems included harassment and denial of family visits.

Abusive Physical Conditions: There were reports authorities caused prisoner deaths by withholding medical treatment and mistreated prisoners with disabilities.

On March 14, Prisoners of Conscience and Sanad reported detained social media personality Mansour al-Raqeba had kidney failure, suffered from a disorder in blood sugar levels, and had severe bouts of depression, due to deliberate medical negligence by the prison administration.

On April 9, Sanad and Prisoners of Conscience reported academic Abdulaziz

al-Zahrani had died of cancer. The organizations held authorities responsible for his death for denying him access to health care during his four-and-a-half-year detention, following which he was released to hospitalization in March 2022.

Authorities differentiated between violent and nonviolent prisoners, sometimes pardoning nonviolent, nonpolitical prisoners other than those detained on political or freedom of expression grounds to reduce the prison population. In contrast, prison officials reportedly made an exception and did not pardon those detained on political or freedom of expression grounds.

In some cases, Shia inmates reportedly faced worse conditions than Sunni prisoners.

Family members of detained persons under investigation or in pretrial detention said family visits were typically not allowed, while others said visits or calls were extremely brief (less than five minutes). Authorities at times reportedly denied some detainees their entitled weekly call for several months or years. Some family members of prisoners complained authorities canceled scheduled family visits without justification.

Administration: There were two legal authorities for prisons and detention centers. The General Directorate of Prisons administered most detention centers, prisons, and jails, while the General Directorate of Investigation (Mabahith) administered some regional prisons and detention centers for

so-called security prisoners.

Activists questioned the impartiality of procedures to investigate detainee complaints of torture and maltreatment. The governmental Human Rights Commission (HRC), which was responsible for coordinating with other government entities to investigate and respond to alleged human rights violations, and the quasi-governmental National Society for Human Rights (NSHR) had offices at main prisons with which prisoners or their families could file complaints, but there were reports that prisoners were censored if they tried to submit allegations of mistreatment to prison or prosecutorial authorities. There was no information that any official actions were taken to address prisoner complaints.

The government permitted the governmental HRC and quasi-governmental NSHR to monitor prison conditions. The organizations stated they visited prisons throughout the country and reported on prison conditions, although their reports were not publicly available.

Independent Monitoring: Independent, nongovernmental institutions were not permitted to conduct regular, unannounced visits to places of detention, according to the UN Committee against Torture. In a limited number of cases, foreign diplomats were granted consular visits to individuals in detention, but the visits took place in a separate visitors' center where conditions might differ from those in the detention facilities holding the prisoners. Prison conditions were therefore difficult to observe systemically.

d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention

The law provided that no entity could restrict a person's actions or imprison a person, except under the provisions of the law. The criminal procedure prohibited authorities from detaining a person for more than 24 hours, but the Ministry of Interior and the State Security Presidency, to which most forces with arrest powers reported, nonetheless arrested and detained persons indefinitely without judicial oversight, notification of charges, or effective access to legal counsel or family, according to human rights groups.

By law, detainees were not entitled to challenge the lawfulness of their detention before a court. In the case of wrongful detention, the law of criminal procedure, as well as provisions of the counterterrorism law, provided for the right to compensation if detainees were found to have been held unlawfully.

Arrest Procedures and Treatment of Detainees

The law gave the Public Prosecutor's Office "complete and independent powers" to identify major crimes that required detention.

According to the law, "No person shall be arrested, searched, detained, or imprisoned except in cases provided by law, and any accused person shall have the right to seek the assistance of a lawyer or a representative to defend him during the investigation and trial stages." By law authorities could summon any person for investigation and could issue an arrest

warrant based on evidence. Authorities frequently did not use warrants, which were not required under the law in all cases.

The law required authorities to file charges within 72 hours of arrest and to hold a trial within six months, subject to exceptions specified by amendments to the law of criminal procedure and the counterterrorism law. Authorities could not legally detain a person under arrest for more than 24 hours except pursuant to a written order from a public investigator. Authorities reportedly often failed to observe these legal protections, and there was no requirement to advise suspects of their rights.

The law specified procedures required for extending the detention period of an accused person beyond the initial five days. There was a functioning bail system for less serious and apolitical criminal charges. Authorities could approve detentions of more than six months in “exceptional circumstances,” effectively allowing individuals to be held in pretrial detention indefinitely in cases involving “terrorism” or “violations of state security” charges. The Public Prosecutor’s Office could order the detention of any person accused of a crime under the counterterrorism law for up to 30 days, renewable for up to 12 months or for up to 24 months in state security cases with a judge’s approval.

By law defendants were entitled to hire a lawyer to defend them “within an adequate period of time to be decided by the investigatory body.” The government provided lawyers to defendants who made a formal application

to the Ministry of Justice to receive a court-appointed lawyer and proved their inability to pay for legal representation. In cases involving “terrorism” or “state security” charges (often the charges brought in political or freedom of expression cases), detainees generally were not permitted to be represented by a lawyer of their choice.

There were reports authorities did not always allow legal counsel access to detainees under investigation in pretrial detention. By law a suspect could be held up to 12 months in investigative detention without access to legal counsel if authorized by prosecutors. Judicial proceedings began after authorities completed a full investigation.

The king continued the tradition of commuting some judicial punishments. Royal pardons could set aside a conviction or reduce or eliminate corporal punishment. The remaining sentence could be added to a new sentence if the pardoned prisoner committed a crime after release. In March, the king issued a royal pardon for certain Saudi and non-Saudi prisoners on the occasion of Ramadan. Local media reported the General Directorate of Prisons started implementing the measures to release these prisoners.

Authorities commuted the sentences of some who had received prison terms. The counterterrorism law allowed the Public Prosecutor’s Office to stop proceedings against an individual who cooperated with investigations or cooperated in thwarting a planned terrorist attack. The law authorized the State Security Presidency to release individuals already convicted in such

cases.

Incommunicado detention regularly occurred. On March 23, Amnesty International reported that on March 12, authorities executed Hussein Abo al-Kheir, a Jordanian citizen, who was sentenced to death in Saudi Arabia in 2015 for drug-related offenses following a “grossly unfair trial.” According to the report, during his pretrial detention, al-Kheir was subjected to an array of human rights violations, including incommunicado detention, lack of access to legal representation, and torture to extract a “confession.”

On June 29, the International Bar Association’s Human Rights Institute (IBAHRI) issued a letter to the government expressing concern over reports that 10 former judges had been charged with “high treason” – a charge carrying a potential death sentence. The IBAHRI noted the judges were arrested in April 2022 and held in incommunicado pretrial detention for 10 months, without access to their families or a lawyer. The letter called on authorities to “cease the use of incommunicado detention and to immediately and unconditionally release all those who have been arbitrarily arrested and detained; to ensure the right to a fair trial and due process; to review the scope of the death penalty without delay to ensure that its imposition and implementation are strictly limited to the confines of international law...and to introduce an immediate moratorium on its use with a view to abolition.”

Authorities reportedly did not always respect a detainee’s right to contact

family members following detention, and the counterterrorism law allowed the investigatory body to hold a defendant for up to 90 days in detention (or longer) without access to family members or legal counsel. Security and other types of prisoners sometimes remained in prolonged solitary detention before family members or associates received information of their whereabouts, particularly for detainees in Mabahith-run facilities.

The right of foreign detainees to timely consular access was generally respected, with notable exceptions, especially in the case of detainees holding both Saudi and foreign citizenships.

Arbitrary Arrest: Rights groups received reports from families claiming authorities held their relatives arbitrarily or without notification of charges. Authorities detained without charge individuals exercising freedom of expression, including government critics, Shia religious leaders, individuals with links to human rights activists, persons accused of violating so-called religious standards, and so-called security suspects.

On February 1, the UN special rapporteur on human rights defenders said she wrote to the government in November 2022, expressing serious concerns regarding the continued arbitrary detention, after the completion of their sentences, of human rights defenders Mohammad al-Rabea, Issa al-Nukheifi, and Mohammed al-Qahtani, as well as concerns for their physical and mental health. Al-Rabea was arrested in 2018 for his activism in support of women's ability to drive and opposition to the guardianship

system. He was sentenced to six years in prison in 2021, reduced to four years and six months on appeal, and to 17 years in prison in a December 2022 retrial for charges of “striving to destabilize the social fabric and weaken national cohesion and community cohesion,” “communicating with others with the intent of disturbing the security and stability of the nation,” and “writing and publishing a book containing suspicious instructions.”

Pretrial Detention: Lengthy pretrial detention was a problem, and individuals were detained without charges for long periods.

On May 16, a lawsuit filed against X and senior Saudi officials on behalf of imprisoned aid worker Abdulrahman al-Sadhan alleged his sister Areej had learned from informal sources that he had been tortured and held in solitary confinement for years after his March 2018 arrest, according to *The Guardian*. As of the end of the year, he was being held incommunicado.

On June 14, Amnesty International reported Abdullah al-Darazi, who was reportedly age 17 at the time of his alleged offenses, told the court he had been held in pretrial detention for three years, during which time he was tortured and not allowed access to a lawyer. Al-Darazi was arrested in 2014 in relation to his participation in protests in al-Qatif Governorate against the kingdom’s treatment of Shia citizens there. On October 16, the UN special rapporteur on summary, extrajudicial, or arbitrary executions expressed concern at al-Darazi’s imminent execution. There were no further updates on the case as of year’s end.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The law provided that judges were independent and not subject to any authority other than the provisions of sharia and the laws in force, but the judiciary reportedly was subject to influence, particularly in the case of legal decisions rendered by specialized judicial bodies such as the SCC, which rarely acquitted suspects. The SCC and the Public Prosecutor's Office were not independent entities, as they reportedly were required to coordinate their decisions with government authorities, including the king and crown prince. Human rights activists claimed that SCC judges received implicit instructions to issue harsh sentences against human rights activists, reformers, journalists, and dissidents not engaged in violent activities. Activists also reported judicial and prosecutorial authorities ignored due process-related complaints, including lack of access by lawyers to their clients at critical stages of the judicial process, particularly during the pretrial investigation phase.

According to a July report by Amnesty International, authorities silenced dissent by convicting and sentencing individuals in grossly unfair trials before the SCC, established to try individuals for terrorism-related crimes, on vague charges that regularly equated peaceful expression with terrorism. In most cases reviewed by Amnesty International, defendants were arrested without a warrant and without being informed of the charges; held incommunicado, often in solitary confinement; deprived of access to their

families or a lawyer; tortured or otherwise mistreated in pretrial detention; held without charge or trial, including without any opportunity to challenge the legality of their detention; and convicted and, in many cases, sentenced to lengthy prison terms or to death, on vague, “catch-all” charges that criminalized peaceful opposition as “terrorism.”

Trial Procedures

The law provided for the right to a fair and public trial, but the judiciary generally did not enforce this right. The judicial system traditionally lacked published case law on criminal matters, a uniform criminal code, the presumption of innocence, or a doctrine of stare decisis that bound judges to follow legal precedent. In the absence of a formalized penal code detailing all criminal offenses and punishments, judges determined penalties through individualized interpretations of sharia, which varied according to the judge and the circumstances of the case. This significant judicial discretion led to rulings and sentences that diverged widely from case to case.

Appeals courts could not independently reverse lower-court judgments of innocence or guilt and were limited to affirming judgments, modifying sentences, or returning them to the lower court for modification. Even when appeals judges did not affirm judgments, in some cases they remanded the judgment to the original trial judge, sometimes making it difficult for parties to receive a ruling that differed from the original

judgment, due to judges' hesitation to admit error.

Although the law stated court hearings should be public, judges regularly closed courts at their discretion. According to the Ministry of Justice, authorities could close a trial depending on the sensitivity of the case to national security, the reputation of the defendant, or the safety of witnesses. Representatives of the governmental HRC sometimes attended SCC trials. Foreign diplomats regularly requested to attend trials of political prisoners and other high-profile detainees, but the Ministry of Foreign Affairs uniformly refused to approve their attendance at the SCC, as well as at trials related to state security or human rights issues. Diplomatic personnel generally were allowed to attend criminal trials of their own citizens. Some family members of prisoners complained that neither they nor the legal representatives of the accused were permitted access to trials or notified of the status of trial proceedings, thus preventing the accused from mounting an adequate criminal defense. In several cases, family members were given only 24 hours' notice before a trial hearing.

The law required authorities to offer defendants a lawyer at government expense. NGOs alleged many political prisoners were not allowed to retain an attorney or consult with their attorneys during critical stages of the investigatory and trial proceedings. Detained human rights activists often indicated they did not trust the courts to appoint unbiased lawyers who would vigorously defend them. The law provided defendants the right to be present at trial and to consult with an attorney during the trial. The

counterterrorism law, however, authorized the attorney general to limit the right of a defendant accused of so-called terrorism charges to access legal representation while under investigation, “whenever the interests of the investigation so require.” Defendants had no right to discovery, nor could they view their own case file or the minutes from their interrogation. Defendants had the right to call and cross-examine witnesses, but NGOs reported SCC judges regularly restricted this right in “the interests of the case.” The law provided that a prosecutor-appointed investigator could question the witnesses called by the defendant during the investigation phase before the initiation of a trial. The investigator also could elicit testimony from additional witnesses. Authorities were prohibited from subjecting a defendant to coercive measures or compelling the taking of an oath, but there were regular credible reports of confessions elicited through torture and other mistreatment.

The law did not provide for a right against self-incrimination.

The law provided that “the court should seek the assistance of interpreters” but did not obligate the court to do so from the moment the defendant was charged, nor did the law specify the state would bear the costs of such services. In practice, free interpretation services often were provided.

Sharia, as interpreted by the government, applied to all citizens and noncitizens, but in practice the law discriminated against women, noncitizens, nonpracticing Sunni Muslims, Shia Muslims, and persons of

other religions. Sources reported judges sometimes completely disregarded or refused to hear testimony by Shia individuals.

On January 25, the SCC resentedenced Salma al-Shehab to 27 years in prison, followed by a 27-year travel ban, for publishing tweets in support of women's rights, according to Amnesty International; al-Shehab originally had been sentenced to 34 years in prison in a trial Amnesty International termed "grossly unfair." The rights group called for al-Shehab's immediate and unconditional release. According to Amnesty International, she was detained in solitary confinement for 285 days before being brought to trial, in violation of international fair trial standards and the country's own Law on Criminal Procedures. Al-Shehab had no access to legal representation throughout her pretrial detention, including during interrogations. On July 7, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention called on authorities to release al-Shehab and Nourah bint Saeed al-Qahtani, who was sentenced to 45 years in prison for human rights activism on social media, on the grounds that they were denied due process.

On May 23, according to Amnesty International, the Supreme Court upheld a 10-year prison sentence, reduced on appeal from 20 years, of Egyptian psychiatrist Sabri Shalaby on what Amnesty International called "trumped up terrorism-related charges" following "a grossly unfair trial." He was held in solitary confinement for the first 10 months of his detention and in incommunicado detention for three months during this period. According to Amnesty International, the prosecution presented no material evidence

related to his alleged support for the Muslim Brotherhood, and instead relied on testimonies of two others being tried with him in addition to a confirmation from the Egyptian National Security Agency that Shalaby was supportive of the Muslim Brotherhood. The court never provided Shalaby with the evidence used to convict him of his support of the Muslim Brotherhood. Weeks before his detention in 2020, Shalaby – who was employed by the Ministry of Health between 2006 and 2019 – won a court case against the ministry to receive years of unpaid compensation after discovering he was paid far less than other colleagues. Rights groups suggested there was a link between Shalaby’s legal victory against the government and his subsequent detention, trial, and conviction.

Political Prisoners and Detainees

There were numerous reports of political prisoners or detainees. NGOs and press sources reported authorities regularly detained persons for peaceful activism, government criticism, or political opposition, including nonviolent religious figures, women’s rights activists, human rights defenders, and those alleged to have posted or shared offensive or critical comments on social media. The government nonetheless claimed it held no political prisoners, while local activists and human rights organizations estimated such prisoners numbered in the “hundreds” or “thousands,” including detainees who reportedly remained in prolonged detention without charge.

The SCC tried political and human rights activists for nonviolent actions

unrelated to terrorism, violence, or espionage against the state, and authorities restricted attorneys' access to detainees on trial. In many cases, it was impossible to determine the legal basis for incarceration and whether the detention complied with international norms and standards. The government did not permit access to political prisoners by human rights or humanitarian organizations such as the International Committee of the Red Cross.

International NGOs, the United Nations, and others criticized the government for abusing its antiterrorism and cybercrime legal authorities to detain or arrest, on so-called security-related charges, dissidents or critics of the government or royal family who had neither espoused nor committed violence.

There were numerous reports of political prisoner cases similar to the following examples.

On June 1, authorities arrested fitness instructor and artist Manahel al-Otaibi, who frequently promoted women's empowerment on her social media accounts. Authorities initially detained al-Otaibi in November 2022 and accused her of using a hashtag – which could be translated as “#societyisready” – to call for an end to male guardianship rules. Authorities also charged her with appearing in indecent clothing and posting Arabic hashtags that included the phrase “overthrow the government,” according to court documents seen by the Associated Press. Al-Otaibi's sister, Fouz,

faced similar charges but had earlier fled the country, according to ALQST.

On August 29, HRW reported the SCC sentenced retired teacher Muhammad al-Ghamdi to death based on his social media activity on X and YouTube. HRW reported al-Ghamdi was held incommunicado in solitary confinement for four months without charge after his June 2022 arrest, did not have access to a lawyer for nearly one year, and that once he obtained legal representation, he was able to speak with the lawyer only immediately in advance of court sessions.

f. Transnational Repression

In April, Freedom Initiative released a report on transnational repression (TNR) in the United States by the governments of Egypt and Saudi Arabia. The report concluded that Saudi Arabia engaged in direct and indirect TNR, by targeting individuals in the United States as well as by harassing and detaining dissidents' family members at home with demonstrated intent of repressing speech and acts abroad. The government's TNR tactics included physical harm, surveillance, or threats against individuals in the United States; digital surveillance and harassment; and pursuit of government-supported litigation in U.S. courts. Indirect acts of TNR, taking place inside Saudi Arabia, included the detention of family members or loved ones as proxies, also known as "state hostage taking"; prosecution of U.S. citizens, legal permanent residents, or individuals in the United States; and travel bans that prevented the reunification of families.

In April, Freedom House reported the government “has not reformed its approach to exiled critics” in the years since the 2018 killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, adding that authorities “have attempted to collect information on social media users in the United States criticizing the regime.”

A December Freedom House report on exiled journalism and TNR found the government targeted journalists abroad with TNR, putting their safety and work in peril.

Extraterritorial Killing, Kidnapping, Forced Returns, or Other Violence or Threats of Violence: There were reports that authorities attempted to intimidate critics living abroad, pressure their relatives in country and abroad, and abduct dissidents and repatriate them.

In March, former police colonel Rabih al-Enezi, who publicly criticized the country’s leadership and sought asylum in the United Kingdom, said he feared for his life after a verified account on X purporting to belong to a social media influencer in Jeddah offered a bounty of 10,000 riyals (\$2,670) for his whereabouts. On March 17, al-Enezi’s X account was hacked; a plethora of photographs of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud replaced his tweets criticizing the regime. The same X account that posted the bounty for al-Enezi’s location reported calling a restaurant in the United Kingdom to shut down al-Enezi while he was filming a livestream video critical of Saudi Arabia from the restaurant.

In May, U.S.-based family members of a detained Saudi activist reported Saudi authorities were targeting them with digital harassment, surveillance, and threats of repatriation if they did not cease their activism for the detainee's release.

Threats, Harassment, Surveillance, and Coercion: According to Reporters without Borders (RSF), journalists lived under heavy surveillance, even when abroad. RSF stated “electronic brigades” active on social networks hunted and harassed journalists, and the government used high-tech espionage tools to monitor journalists in exile.

According to Freedom Initiative's April report, even as activists consistently faced monitoring by surveillance technology, as shown during investigations into the killing of Jamal Khashoggi, digital surveillance was often more difficult to detect in real time. Freedom Initiative reported that digital surveillance resulted in serious consequences for individual rights and freedoms. Freedom Initiative conducted a survey of 23 individuals who reported professional or personal ties to Saudi Arabia. Of the respondents, 10 were U.S. citizens; the other 13 held Saudi citizenship. The majority of respondents stated they did not communicate with their family or friends in the country due to the likelihood their conversations were being monitored, and they feared putting themselves or loved ones at risk. More than three-quarters of respondents stated they stopped or adjusted use of social media due to fear they would attract unwanted attention or face harassment on social media.

On July 18, *The Guardian* reported security services closely monitored Snapchat posts (Snaps). In one case, security services questioned apolitical social media influencers “for not posting enough fawning Snaps about the crown prince.” Those interactions sometimes involved threats that an individual would not be awarded the government-approved *Mawthooq* license, required for influencers seeking to earn money on the social media platform. Perceived critics of the regime or royal family, including Khalid al-Jabri, reported being harassed by Snapchat users based in Saudi Arabia, according to *The Guardian*.

Misuse of International Law Enforcement Tools: NGOs reported the government attempted to misuse international law enforcement tools for politically motivated reprisals against individuals located outside the country.

Efforts to Control Mobility: There were reports the government attempted to control mobility as reprisal against citizens abroad, by denying them consular services or otherwise engaging in actions aimed at jeopardizing their legal status, restricting their movement, or provoking their detention in the country where they were located.

For its April report, Freedom Initiative interviewed four individuals who reported the Saudi embassy or a consulate in the United States was delaying or halting their access to identification documents or paperwork due to their perceived political views or association. Several explained the embassy was

withholding or refusing to renew their passports or identity cards, or that they were offered a temporary passport valid only for return to Saudi Arabia. Several said they were told they had to return to the country to renew documents. None of the respondents considered it safe to travel back to Saudi Arabia, and some believed it was a trap to get them to compromise their safety or to silence them.

Bilateral Pressure: On February 6, Morocco extradited Shia Saudi national Hassan al-Rabea to Saudi Arabia despite repeated civil society calls for his release and nonextradition. According to NGOs, al-Rabea left Saudi Arabia in early 2022 due to fear of persecution after harassment of his family by the Saudi government. Moroccan authorities arrested al-Rabea in January at the Marrakesh airport, following the issuance of a provisional arrest warrant by the Arab Interior Ministers Council at Saudi Arabia's request, based on Saudi charges he had "collaborated with terrorists" to flee the country. Fearing that al-Rabea could be subjected to torture and mistreatment in Saudi Arabia, 24 human rights organizations, including HRW and Amnesty International, sent the Moroccan government a public letter seeking an explanation for the extradition decision and stating that al-Rabea's extradition violated Morocco's obligations under international law, including the Convention Against Torture. On the same day as his extradition, the UN Committee against Torture asked the Moroccan government to take interim measures by suspending the extradition, pending a review of al-Rabea's case. On February 7, five UN special procedures mandate holders, including

the UN special rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, expressed their concern regarding Morocco's decision to extradite al-Rabea.

g. Property Seizure and Restitution

On February 16, ALQST published a report detailing a government campaign against members of the Huwaitat tribe who objected to their forcible eviction for construction of a futuristic megacity, NEOM. The report found authorities illegally displaced local tribes in the area the government had identified for building the NEOM project without adequate compensation or offering alternative housing, violently cracked down on members of the tribe who peacefully opposed or resisted eviction, and detained or disappeared at least 47 members of the tribe for speaking out against the project. ALQST stated 15 members of the tribe were sentenced to prison terms of between 15 and 50 years and at least five more were sentenced to death for protesting state seizure of their property.

h. Arbitrary or Unlawful Interference with Privacy, Family, Home, or Correspondence

The law prohibited unlawful intrusions into the privacy of persons, their homes, places of work, and vehicles. While the law also provided for the privacy of all mail, telegrams, telephone conversations, and other means of communication, the government did not respect the privacy of

correspondence or communications and used the considerable latitude provided by the law to monitor activities legally and intervene where it deemed necessary. Authorities regularly targeted family members of activists and critics of the government with intrusions and searches.

There were reports from human rights activists that the government monitored or blocked mobile phone or internet usage. The government strictly monitored politically related activities and used information obtained through monitoring to take punitive actions, including arrests, detentions, and prosecutions, against persons discovered through such monitoring to be engaging in certain political activities, including calling for a constitutional monarchy or publicly criticizing senior members of the royal family by name. Customs officials reportedly opened mail and shipments on a routine basis to search for contraband, which included items such as drugs, weapons, and sexually explicit materials and at times included rainbow-colored toys and anything deemed contrary to the kingdom's morals. Informants allegedly reported "seditious ideas," "antigovernment activity," or "behavior contrary to Islam" in their neighborhoods.

Individuals were forbidden from using their cell phones to record a range of private interactions. The Public Prosecutor's Office reiterated during the year that infringing on private life through the misuse of mobile phones equipped with a camera was a cybercrime punishable by imprisonment for up to one year, a large fine, and confiscation of devices.

The government prohibited the use of encrypted communications by private citizens, and authorities frequently worked to identify and punish anonymous or pseudonymous users and writers who made critical or controversial remarks via social or other media. Government authorities regularly surveilled websites, blogs, chat rooms, social media sites, emails, and text messages. Media outlets reported authorities gained access to critics' and activists' accounts on X and other social media and questioned, detained, or prosecuted individuals for comments made online.

The government used the counterterrorism law to access individuals' private communications and banking information in a manner inconsistent with the legal protections provided by the law of criminal procedure.

i. Conflict-related Abuses

During the year the country, as part of the Saudi-led coalition, paused major military operations in support of the internationally recognized government of Yemen against the Houthi militants following the April 2022 truce. With the pause of major military operations, conflict between the Saudi-led coalition and Houthi forces was generally limited to ground and air incursions along the Saudi-Yemeni border, and the conflict's impact on Saudi civilians dropped sharply from past years.

Prior to the end of its mandate in 2021, the UN Group of Eminent International and Regional Experts expressed concerns regarding the Saudi-

led coalition's efforts to investigate claims of civilian casualties in the conflict in Yemen and to prosecute perpetrators. On June 5, the coalition's Joint Incident Assessment Team (JIAT) announced its conclusions in four investigations into allegations of civilian harm resulting from the January 2022 airstrike against a makeshift Houthi prison in Sa'ada Governorate in Yemen. The JIAT asserted the Saudi-led coalition had adhered to international humanitarian law during the targeting process but recommended coalition countries provide compensation for the deaths and injuries of civilians resulting from the Saudi-led coalition's airstrikes on the facility. In contrast, a February report by the independent UN Security Council Panel of Experts on Yemen concluded that in targeting and striking this facility, Saudi and coalition forces likely failed to comply with their obligations under international humanitarian law, including the legal requirements to adhere to the principles of precaution and distinction.

Killings: There were reports that Saudi security forces along the border with Yemen killed significant numbers of African and Yemeni migrants and asylum seekers using both explosive weapons and by shooting individuals at close range.

Section 2. Respect for Civil Liberties

a. Freedom of Expression, Including for Members of the

Press and Other Media

The law did not provide for or protect freedom of expression, including for members of the press and other media. The law specified, “Mass media and all other vehicles of expression shall employ civil and polite language, contribute towards the education of the nation, and strengthen unity.

Media are prohibited from committing acts that lead to disorder and division, affect the security of the state or its public relations, or undermine human dignity and rights.” Authorities decided what speech or expression was considered to “undermine internal security.” The government could ban or suspend media outlets if it concluded they violated the press and publications law, and it monitored and blocked hundreds of thousands of internet sites. There were frequent reports of restrictions on free speech. On May 3, the U.S.-based human rights organization The Worldwide Information Network of Abductees (THEWINA) reported the government was subjecting 34 journalists to arbitrary detention or travel bans.

The counterterrorism law’s definition of terrorism included “any conduct...intended to disturb public order...or destabilize the state or endanger its national unity.” The law also penalized “anyone who challenges, either directly or indirectly, the religion or justice of the king or crown prince...or anyone who establishes or uses a website or computer program...to commit any of the offenses set out in the law.” Local human rights activists and international human rights organizations faulted the law

for its overly broad and vague definitions of terrorism and criticized the government for using it to prosecute peaceful expression and dissent.

Human rights groups reported the number of persons prosecuted for criticism of the government increased during the year compared with 2022.

Freedom of Expression: The government monitored public expressions of opinion and used legal controls to impede the free expression of opinion and to restrict individuals from engaging in public criticism of the government. The law forbade apostasy and blasphemy, which could carry the death penalty, although there were no recent instances of death sentences being carried out for these crimes. Statements that authorities construed as constituting defamation of the king, monarchy, governing system, or Al Saud family – which the government considered to include any advocacy for government reforms – could result in criminal charges. The government prohibited public employees from directly or indirectly engaging in dialogue with local or foreign media or participating in any meetings intended to oppose state policies.

The government detained numerous individuals for crimes related to their exercise of free speech and sentenced others to prison terms.

On May 22, ESOHR reported the SCC sentenced blogger and musician Ahmed al-Bediwi (Abu Elia) to 23 years' imprisonment for a March 2022 Facebook post paying tribute to the memory of 81 individuals the government executed on March 12, 2022.

On June 1, ALQST reported the SCC Court of Appeal sentenced Fatima al-Shawarbi to 30 years and six months in prison followed by a travel ban for a similar period, for anonymously tweeting regarding political prisoners, women's rights, and unemployment. Sources told ALQST that authorities had arrested al-Shawarbi in 2020 for her online activity on X, including defending prisoners of conscience.

Violence and Harassment: Authorities subjected journalists, writers, and bloggers to violence, harassment, and intimidation. NGOs, academics, and the press claimed the government also used automated social media accounts to harass journalists, writers, and bloggers.

Censorship or Content Restrictions for Members of the Press and Other Media, Including Online Media: The law restricted printed materials; printing presses; bookstores; the import, rental, and sale of films; television and radio; foreign media offices and their correspondents; and online newspapers and journals. All newspapers, blogs, and websites in the country required government licenses. Media was subject to the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Media, which had to approve appointment of all senior editors and had the authority to remove them. The ministry could permanently close “whenever necessary” any means of communication – defined as any means of expressing a viewpoint meant for circulation – that it deemed was engaged in a prohibited activity, as set forth in the law.

Government policy guidance instructed journalists in the country to uphold

Islam, oppose atheism, promote Arab interests, and preserve cultural heritage. The press law required all online newspapers, bloggers, and websites to obtain a license from the ministry. The law banned publishing anything “contradicting sharia, inciting disruption, serving foreign interests that contradict national interests, and damaging the reputation of the grand mufti, members of the Council of Senior Religious Scholars, or senior government officials.” Criticism of the tourism industry also was against the law.

The law stated violators could face substantial fines for each violation of the law, doubled for repeat violations. Other penalties included banning individuals from publishing any writing. While the Violations Considerations Committee in the Ministry of Media was formally responsible for implementing the law, the Ministry of Interior, the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (CPVPV), and judges considered these issues regularly and exercised wide discretion in interpreting the law. It was unclear which, if any, of these institutional processes accorded with the law.

Foreign media and some privately owned satellite networks headquartered outside the country maintained local offices; they were subject to licensing requirements from the Ministry of Media and could not operate freely.

The government provided guidelines to media regarding how they should cover controversial issues. The government reportedly penalized individuals

who published items counter to government guidelines, and directly or indirectly censored media by licensing domestic media and by controlling importation of foreign-printed material.

The government owned most print and broadcast media and book publication facilities in the country, and members of the royal family owned or influenced privately owned and nominally independent operations, including various media outlets and widely circulated pan-Arab newspapers published outside the country. Authorities prevented or delayed the distribution of foreign print media covering issues considered sensitive, effectively censoring these publications.

The government censored online and print material it considered blasphemous, extremist, racist, offensive, or inciting chaos, violence, sectarianism, or harm to the public order, as well as criticism of the royal family or its allies among the Gulf Arab states.

On March 29, Prisoners of Conscience and SANAD reported the SCC Court of Appeal increased the prison sentence of social media personality Mansour al-Raqeeba from 18 to 27 years. Al-Raqeeba was arrested and sentenced in 2022 on charges of “disseminating false news” for posting a video on social media in which he discussed being subjected to blackmail in exchange for a sum of money.

On June 3, Riyadh regional police arrested a citizen on charges of insulting one of the country’s regions on social media. Attorney General Saud al-

Mu'jab ordered the citizen's arrest for publishing content that would prejudice public order and stir up tribal strife, according to the English-language daily newspaper *Saudi Gazette*. There were no further updates as of the end of year.

Online self-censorship was pervasive, as social media users were extremely cautious regarding what they posted, shared, or “liked,” due to the credible threat of harassment or prosecution under overbroad antiterrorism and other laws. International media outlets claimed the government targeted journalists, writers, and bloggers using automated social media accounts to ensure that progovernment messages dominated social media trend lists and effectively silenced dissenting voices, accompanied in some instances by online harassment from progovernment accounts. The government closely monitored and often targeted users who expressed support for minority rights or political reforms, as well as users who exposed human rights violations. Social media users reportedly were reluctant to express support for outspoken activists who had been detained or received prison sentences. The counterterrorism law criminalized “calling for atheist thought in any form or calling into question the fundamentals of the Islamic religion,” particularly content related to the Prophet Muhammad.

Libel/Slander Laws: The cybercrimes law provided for a penalty of up to one year's imprisonment for “defamation and infliction of damage upon others through the use of various information technology devices,” including social media and social networks. The government actively used this law to

silence dissent. Individuals charged were usually also charged with other provisions of the cybercrime law.

National Security: Authorities abused the cybercrimes law and the counterterrorism law to restrict freedom of expression, including by prosecuting numerous individuals under these laws on charges related to statements made on social media and other exercises of freedom of expression. There were numerous abuses similar to the following examples.

On January 25, local media reported authorities arrested a citizen in al-Jouf Province for publishing content insulting government agencies.

On April 13, ALQST reported state-run television's *Blind Spot* program interviewed five social media users imprisoned for cybercrime offenses, including one incarcerated for an "offensive" tweet regarding his opinions and feelings who contended other Saudis were serving sentences of up to 15 years for posting on X, even anonymously. ALQST stated viewers were left with the clear message that virtually any online activity was a potential cybercrime.

On June 5, *The Guardian* reported state media issued an explicit warning that it was a criminal offense under the cybercrimes law to "insult" authorities using social media apps such as Snapchat. The threat was shown on state television in April before being deleted online.

Internet Freedom

The government restricted and disrupted access to the internet and censored online content.

The press and publications law implicitly covered electronic media, since it extended to any means of expression of a viewpoint meant for circulation, ranging from words to cartoons, photographs, and sounds. Security authorities actively monitored internet activity to enforce laws, regulations, and societal norms and to monitor recruitment efforts by extremist organizations such as ISIS. The government prosecuted individuals who used the internet to criticize government officials or religious authorities, or express support for terrorism, blasphemy, and apostasy.

The government reportedly collected information concerning the identity of persons peacefully expressing political, religious, or ideological opinions or beliefs online. According to Freedom House's 2023 report, the government maintained an extensive system of social media surveillance and regulation and invested considerable resources in automated "bot" and other accounts that influenced and distorted the social media environment and targeted prominent users. It also used a vaguely worded and broad-ranging cybercrime law as a means of cracking down on the sharing of critical news and commentary online.

On July 4, Prisoners of Conscience reported a court issued a 27-year prison sentence against Malik al-Dowaish, son of detained cleric Sulaiman al-

Dowaish. In July 2022, authorities arrested Malik after he wrote an online article accusing the government of abducting, torturing, and forcibly disappearing his father six years earlier. Malik remained in prison as of the end of the year.

On September 22, ALQST reported the SCC sentenced high school student Manal al-Gafiri, age 18, in August to 18 years in prison and a travel ban of the same length for posting tweets in support of political prisoners. Al-Gafiri was 17 at the time of her arrest, according to ALQST.

Access to the internet was legally available only through government-authorized internet service providers. The government required internet service providers to monitor customers and required internet cafes to install hidden cameras and provide identity records of customers. Authorities blocked websites offering proxy access.

On many occasions, government officials and senior clerics publicly warned against inaccurate reports on the internet and reminded the public that criticism of the government and its officials should be done through private channels, including official complaint processes.

On May 8, local media warned that “spreading rumors and lies about matters related to public order” was a serious crime, punishable by up to five years in prison, heavy fines, and confiscation of the devices and tools used. On May 11, the General Commission for Audiovisual Media summoned and referred to the public prosecutor social media celebrity

Rahaf al-Qahtani for “spreading rumors” regarding the work of the CPVPV in a video she posted online alleging the CPVPV forced unrelated couples caught together in private settings to marry for two years.

The law criminalized the publication or downloading of “offensive” websites, and authorities routinely blocked sites containing material perceived as harmful, illegal, offensive, or anti-Islamic. The governmental Communications and Information Technology Commission filtered and blocked access to websites it deemed offensive, including sites calling for domestic political, social, or economic reforms or supporting human rights. It also blocked the websites of expatriate Saudi dissidents.

Several Voice over Internet Protocol call services, such as WhatsApp, remained blocked and were accessible only by using a virtual private network. Progovernment trolls and automated accounts or bots reportedly used “hashtag poisoning,” a method of spamming a popular hashtag to disrupt criticism or other unwanted conversations through a flood of unrelated or opposing tweets.

The Personal Data Protection Law, published in 2021, regulated collection, processing, storing, and transfer of data, and stipulated that the unlawful transfer of personal data outside the country could result in “criminal conviction and imprisonment.”

The government blocked some Qatari websites, such as *Bein Sports*. The government also blocked access to the website of the Turkish public

broadcaster TRT's Arabic edition. Writing for blocked websites, providing them with materials to publish, or promoting alternative addresses to access them were crimes under the cybercrimes law.

b. Freedoms of Peaceful Assembly and Association

The law provided for very limited freedom of assembly and association, but the government did not respect even these limited rights.

Freedom of Peaceful Assembly

The law required a government permit for an organized public assembly of any type. The government categorically forbade participation in political protests or unauthorized public assemblies. Security forces in the past allowed a small number of unauthorized demonstrations throughout the country, but there were no known reports of demonstrations during the year.

On February 2, the SCC Court of Appeals upheld prison sentences ranging from 10 to 18 years issued in 2022 against 10 Egyptian men arrested two years earlier for attempting to organize a peaceful remembrance event marking the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, according to ALQST and Amnesty International.

Freedom of Association

The law provided for very limited freedom of association, but the

government strictly restricted this right. The law provided a comprehensive legal framework to govern and restrict the establishment, operation, and supervision of associations and foundations. The government prohibited the establishment of political parties. All associations had to be licensed by the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development and comply with its regulations. Groups that advocated changing elements of the social or political order reported their licensing requests went unanswered for years, despite repeated inquiries. The ministry reportedly used arbitrary means such as requiring unreasonable types and quantities of information to delay and effectively deny licenses to associations. Government-chartered associations limited membership only to citizens.

c. Freedom of Religion

See the Department of State's *International Religious Freedom Report* at <https://www.state.gov/international-religious-freedom-reports/>.

d. Freedom of Movement and the Right to Leave the Country

The law did not prohibit internal movement, emigration, or repatriation of citizens; however, in practice, restrictions persisted related to the movement of women citizens. The government imposed some restrictions on foreign travel.

In-country Movement: The government generally did not restrict the free movement of male citizens within the country. The guardianship system no longer required a woman to have the permission of her male guardian (normally a father, husband, son, brother, grandfather, uncle, or other male relative) to move freely within the country, but male guardians and other family members could report women to police for being “absent” from their homes, which could lead to the women being arrested and forcibly returned home or subjected to administrative detention. In 2021, an amendment to the civil procedures law removed provisions for immediate enforcement of court-ordered obedience requirements for women to be returned home, but it was unclear whether police had translated this legal change into practice. Parents and husbands or other male guardians also could file “disobedience” cases against their children, including adult children, and spouses. In such cases, no evidence was required, and cases were referred to the court after a complaint was filed. Such cases could result in arrest and forcible return to the parent or guardian’s home or imprisonment, even of adult women. A husband’s financial support was also contingent on a wife’s “obedience”; a wife could lose her right to support if she refused without a “legitimate excuse” to have intercourse with her husband, move to or live in the marital home, or travel with him.

Foreign Travel: The government regularly restricted foreign travel, especially for human rights defenders, women’s rights activists, and those perceived as critical of the government, as well as their families. In addition,

travel documents allowing international travel were unavailable to the kingdom's tens of thousands of stateless residents.

The government reportedly confiscated passports for political reasons and revoked the rights of some citizens to travel, often without providing them any notification or opportunity to contest the restriction. Courts regularly imposed travel bans as part of criminal sentences, restricting an individual's ability to leave the country after being released from prison. Travel bans reportedly were imposed against individuals being prosecuted for charges related to state security, corruption, labor, financial, or real estate disputes, in addition to other crimes.

Activists, media, and rights groups alleged the government used travel bans as part of a broader effort to suppress free expression and dissent. Activists estimated tens of thousands of citizens were under travel restrictions, including released activists, relatives of citizens detained in the government's anti-corruption campaign, and relatives of detained clerics and human rights activists.

On March 10, RSF called on authorities to immediately lift the travel ban imposed on blogger Raif Badawi, who was released from prison in March 2022 but remained under a 10-year post-release travel ban at year's end.

On May 8, THEWINA rights group reported that 19 family members of detained cleric Salman al-Odah, who was facing the death penalty for refusing a 2017 order to tweet a message in support of the government's

blockade of Qatar, remained subject to travel bans.

According to an Amnesty International report released on August 1, 13 women's rights activists arrested in 2018 who had campaigned against the ban on women driving and the male guardianship system remained subject to travel bans of equal duration to their prison terms.

Citizens younger than 21 required a guardian's consent to travel abroad.

Expatriate domestic workers required employer approval to travel or depart the country. Foreign citizen workers under sponsorship required the sponsor's consent to travel abroad unless they resigned and permanently departed the country.

e. Protection of Refugees

The government cooperated with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other humanitarian organizations in providing protection and assistance to refugees, returning refugees, or asylum seekers, as well as other persons of concern.

Access to Asylum: The law provided that the "state will grant political asylum if public interest so dictates." Generally, there was not a codified asylum system for those fleeing persecution, and the country was not a party to the 1951 Refugee Convention. The government permitted asylum seekers and refugees recognized by UNHCR to stay in the country temporarily as visitors, pending identification of a durable solution, including

third-country resettlement or voluntary repatriation. The government required, however, individuals with this status to possess valid identity documents throughout the duration of their stay. Authorities held indefinitely but typically did not deport individuals UNHCR recognized as asylum seekers and refugees but who lacked valid documents. The government generally did not grant asylum or accept refugees for resettlement from third countries. Government policy was to refuse refugee status to persons in the country illegally, including those who overstayed a pilgrimage visa. The government strongly encouraged persons without residency to leave, and it threatened or imposed deportation. Access to naturalization was difficult for refugees.

The government did not recognize the right of citizens to petition for access to asylum or refugee status in foreign countries. The law penalized citizens who sought asylum in foreign countries. On July 23, the King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Center (KSRelief), the country's lead humanitarian assistance agency, affirmed that refugees and asylum seekers in the country enjoyed the status of visitors, adding that the government had spent more than \$18 billion since 2011 assisting individuals in this visitor category from Yemen and Syria as well as Rohingya Muslims from Myanmar. In 2022, KSRelief reported the country hosted more than one million of these visitors in recent years.

Refoulement: Multiple media sources claimed the government had increased activities to arrest and deport undocumented migrants. It was

unclear whether the government provided detained migrants or other visitors a meaningful opportunity to seek asylum as a defense to deportation.

According to a January 11 *Middle East Eye* article, there were claims the government was deporting Uyghurs to China despite concerns that they could be tortured, subjected to arbitrary detention, or otherwise abused if repatriated.

On June 26, the International Organization for Migration reported that almost 100,000 Ethiopians were forcibly returned from Saudi Arabia in 2022. An August 21 HRW report found mass pushbacks of Ethiopian asylum seekers and migrants at the Saudi border with Yemen, which HRW asserted did not allow for individual assessments of someone's right to seek international protection; migrants and asylum seekers returned or pushed back to Yemen almost certainly faced a risk of persecution, torture, rape or other mistreatment, or a threat to life. The HRW report stated conditions were such that migrants returned to Yemen contended they had no choice but to again attempt to enter Saudi Arabia, despite knowing the severe risk of being fired upon by Saudi security forces whose pushbacks into Yemen might intentionally put lives at risk (because Saudi security forces on the border knew that Ethiopian migrants could be victims of abuses by Houthi forces).

Abuse of Refugees and Asylum Seekers: In April, the Mixed Migration

Centre (MMC), an international network carrying out research and analysis on migration, reported interviews conducted in January with Ethiopian returnees from Saudi Arabia revealed arbitrary and prolonged detention, averaging 11 months. Furthermore, according to the MMC, detainees lacked food, water, and general hygiene in detention centers and suffered abuse and death at the hands of detention center officials; poor sanitary conditions caused the spread of diseases such as tuberculosis.

Migrants and asylum seekers attempting to reach the country via Yemen reportedly faced significant dangers, including from the conflict. On July 5, the MMC reported Saudi security forces trying to deter persons from crossing the border with Yemen systematically targeted and killed Ethiopian migrants. The MMC estimated that between January and April, at least 75 migrants died and 226 were injured from Saudi artillery or sniper fire on the border with Yemen, and that 794 individuals were killed and 1,703 injured there during 2022.

In its August 21 report, HRW stated Saudi security forces on the border killed at least 650 Ethiopian migrants and asylum seekers who tried to cross the Yemen-Saudi border between March 2022 and June 2023. HRW reported evidence that the security forces used explosive weapons and shot individuals at close range, including women and children. The report also stated Saudi security forces perpetrated sexual violence, arbitrary detention, and torture against migrants and asylum seekers attempting to enter Saudi Arabia from Yemen.

As of the end of the year, the government was restricting access to the Saudi side of the border, which was subject to skirmishes between Saudi and Houthi forces, limiting the United Nations' and NGOs' ability to investigate reports of human rights abuses by security forces against migrants and asylum seekers.

Freedom of Movement: According to HRW's August 21 report on abuses at the Saudi-Yemeni border, Saudi authorities often detained Ethiopian migrants and asylum seekers in detention facilities, sometimes for months.

Employment: Refugees and asylum seekers were generally unable to work legally, although Syrian and Yemeni citizens who possessed a temporary visa could obtain a visitor card from the Ministry of Interior, which reportedly allowed them to work. The renewable permits were valid for up to six months and tied to the validity period of their temporary visas; men between the ages of 18 and 60 were eligible to apply. On April 19, the Saudi ambassador to Yemen stated his embassy had issued approximately 850,000 work visas and 350,000 family visit visas to Yemenis since 2018.

Most Rohingya refugees in the country lacked proper documentation. They were unable to get residency permits, a requirement to work legally in the kingdom.

Access to Basic Services: The government provided preferential access to education, health care, public housing, and other social services to citizens and certain legal residents. The UNHCR office in Riyadh provided a

subsistence allowance covering basic services to a limited number of vulnerable families, based on a needs assessment. Authorities worked with the local UNHCR office to provide medical treatment, also following a needs assessment. The government provided COVID-19 vaccines at no cost to all citizens and residents, regardless of legal status.

f. Status and Treatment of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)

Not applicable.

g. Stateless Persons

The country had several groups of habitual residents who were legally stateless, but data on the stateless population were incomplete and scarce. In past years, the United Nations unofficially estimated there were 70,000 stateless persons in the country, almost all of whom were native-born residents known as *Bidoon* (an Arabic word that means “without” [citizenship]) whose ancestors failed to obtain nationality during the reign of the country’s founder, King Abdulaziz. Bidoon included descendants of nomadic tribes not counted among the native tribes, descendants of foreign-born fathers who arrived before there were laws regulating citizenship, and rural migrants whose parents failed to register their births. As noncitizens, Bidoon were unable to obtain passports. The government sometimes denied them employment and educational opportunities, and

their marginalized status made them among the poorest residents of the country. The government issued Bidoon five-year residency permits to facilitate their social integration in government-provided health care and other services, putting them on similar footing with sponsored foreign workers. The Jawazat (General Directorate of Passports) issued special identification cards to Bidoon, which were similar to residency permits issued to foreigners in the country, but with features entitling their holders to additional government services similar to those available to citizens.

Citizenship was generally derived only from the father. The law approved acquisition of the original nationality by way of descent through the mother, as an exception, when the mother was a Saudi at the time of birth of the baby and the baby's father was of unknown nationality or no nationality. Children born to an unmarried citizen mother who was not legally affiliated with the citizen father could be considered stateless, even if the father recognized the child as his. If the government did not authorize the marriage of a citizen father and a noncitizen mother prior to birth of the children, they also could be considered stateless.

The nationality laws did not allow Saudi women married to foreign citizens to pass their nationality to their children, except in certain circumstances as noted above. Children of Saudi women married to foreign spouses received permanent residency, but their residency status was revocable in the event of the death of the mother. Sons of citizen mothers and noncitizen fathers could apply for citizenship once they turned 18 (if not already granted

citizenship at birth under certain circumstances); daughters in such cases could obtain citizenship only through marriage to a Saudi man. A child could lose legal identification and accompanying rights if authorities withdrew identification documents from a parent (possible when a naturalized parent denaturalized voluntarily or lost citizenship through other acts).

Some Baloch, West African, and Rohingya Muslims resident in Saudi Arabia were stateless. Some Rohingya had expired passports that Burma or other countries refused to renew. Others had entered the country with fraudulent travel documents and some of them were subsequently detained for years. Those who arrived in the country after 2008 were not eligible for residency permits, although NGOs reported that Rohingya, including those without legal residency, were generally not subject to deportation. On May 18, the *Saudi Gazette* newspaper reported Saudi Arabia and Pakistan signed an agreement to issue Pakistani passports to some members of the Rohingya community in Saudi Arabia to correct their legal status in the country after Pakistan, which had been renewing their passports, stopped the process in 2012.

There were also between 300,000 and 400,000 Palestinians living in the country who were not registered as refugees.

Section 3. Freedom to Participate in the Political

Process

The law did not provide citizens the ability to choose their national government in free and fair periodic elections held by secret ballot and based on universal and equal suffrage; it established an absolute monarchy led by the Al Saud family as the political system. The Allegiance Council, composed of up to 34 senior princes appointed by the king, was formally responsible for selecting a king and crown prince upon the death or incapacitation of either. Only select members of the ruling family had a voice in the choice of leaders, the composition of the government, or changes to the political system.

The law provided citizens the right to communicate with public authorities on any matter and established the government on the principle of *shura* (consultation). The king and senior officials, including ministers and regional governors, were required to be available through *majlis*, open-door meetings where any male citizen or noncitizen could express an opinion or a grievance without an appointment. Senior leaders were typically unavailable to the public, but their representatives or lower-level officials continued this traditional practice. Officials could also be reached through written petitions, such as an appeal of decisions from the legal system.

Elections and Political Participation

Abuses or Irregularities in Recent Elections: The country's most recent

election, held in 2015, covered two-thirds of municipal councils.

Independent polling station observers identified no significant irregularities with the election.

Political Parties and Political Participation: There were no political parties or similar associations. The law did not protect the right of individuals to organize politically and specifically banned several organizations with political wings, including the Muslim Brotherhood, as terrorist groups. The government regarded human rights organizations, such as the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association, as illegal political movements and treated them accordingly.

Participation of Women and Members of Marginalized or Vulnerable

Groups: The law permitted women and men to engage in political activities on an equally limited basis. For the first time, women could vote and run for office in the 2015 municipal elections and be appointed on the Shura council. Women occupied a small number of senior positions within government ministries. There were no women on the High Court or Supreme Judicial Council and only one woman judge. There were no women public prosecutors. There was no specific law that prevented lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or intersex (LGBTQI+) persons from voting or running for office, but no openly LGBTQI+ individual had run for office.

No laws prevented male citizens from minority groups from participating in

political life on the same basis as other male citizens. Societal discrimination, however, marginalized the Shia population, and tribal factors and long-standing traditions dictated many individual appointments to positions. Government authorities were unlikely to appoint a Bedouin tribesman to a high-ranking ministerial-level position or the most senior positions in the armed forces.

While the religious affiliation of Shura Council members was not publicized, the 150-member council included an estimated seven or eight Shia members.

Section 4. Corruption in Government

The law provided criminal penalties for official corruption, and the government generally implemented the law effectively. Nazaha (the National Control and Anticorruption Commission) had sole authority to investigate and prosecute reports of corruption involving government employees. Nazaha's ministerial-level director reported directly to the king. The government prosecuted some officials for corruption, although there were allegations of a significant lack of respect for fair trial guarantees and other human rights abuses or violations, including allegations of torture, in these cases. Human rights organizations criticized the government for using anti-corruption campaigns as a pretext to target political opponents and for arbitrarily detaining and abusing individuals targeted in crackdowns.

Corruption: Nazaha conducted countercorruption campaigns throughout the year. It published monthly reports of its activities, providing the overall number of investigations and arrests during the prior month and a list of the government ministries or agencies involved. It periodically published limited details concerning convictions in cases that involved either senior-level officials or large sums of money; however, the press releases did not identify the officials by name or provide enough details to allow identification.

Throughout the year Nazaha provided periodic updates on arrests of individuals on corruption related charges, including bribery, abuse of power, and forgery. For example, on March 5, Nazaha announced that it arrested several individuals on corruption charges, including the head of the consular section at the Saudi embassy in Bangladesh and his deputy for receiving 54 million riyals (\$14.4 million) in exchange for illegally issuing work visas. On August 17, Nazaha announced a total of 107 individuals were arrested on corruption charges during the Hijri month of Muharram.

For additional information concerning corruption in the country, please see the Department of State's *Investment Climate Statement* for the country, and the Department of State's *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report*, which includes information on financial crimes.

Section 5. Governmental Posture Towards International and Nongovernmental Monitoring and

Investigation of Alleged Abuses of Human Rights

The government restricted the activities of domestic and international human rights organizations, although the law provided “the State shall protect human rights in accordance with Islamic sharia,” and government officials were neither cooperative with nor responsive to independent human rights organizations.

The government often cooperated with and sometimes accepted recommendations of the quasi-governmental NSHR, the sole government-licensed domestic human rights civil society organization. The NSHR accepted requests for assistance and complaints regarding government actions affecting human rights. The government blocked websites of unlicensed local human rights groups and charged their founders with operating unlicensed organizations (see section 2.b., Freedom of Association).

The government did not allow international human rights NGOs to be based in the country and restricted their access to the country for visits; there were no transparent standards governing visits by international NGO representatives. International human rights and humanitarian NGOs reported the government was unresponsive to requests for information and did not establish a clear mechanism for communication with NGOs on domestic human rights issues and issues relating to the conflict in Yemen.

Retribution against Human Rights Defenders: There were numerous reports of threats or violence against human rights defenders (HRDs).

According to Front Line Defenders' *Global Analysis 2022* report, released on April 4, the government persecuted and retaliated against HRDs who had completed their long-term sentences, either by extending their sentences or by retrying them to prolong their detention. Mohammed al-Qahtani, an academic, HRD and cofounder of the now disbanded Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association, was due to be released from prison in November 2022, after serving a 10-year sentence on charges of "breaking allegiance to the ruler," questioning the integrity of officials, seeking to disrupt security and inciting disorder by calling for demonstrations, and instigating international organizations against the government, according to the Freedom Initiative. Despite completing his prison sentence, he was not released and had been subjected to more than 14 months of enforced disappearance by year's end, when his whereabouts remained unknown. On April 24, a group of 16 human rights organizations, including Amnesty International, ALQST, ESOHR, and MENA Rights Group, called on authorities to reveal his health condition and immediately and unconditionally release him. On May 16, UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders Mary Lawlor called on authorities to release al-Qahtani and described as disturbing the news that his trial on new charges had been adjourned twice due to his absence and that his family and lawyer had no information concerning him.

On August 11, ALQST and Prisoners of Conscience reported that authorities

forcibly disappeared human rights activist Essa al-Nukheifi, despite his having completed a 10-year prison sentence due to his role in detecting cases of financial corruption and defending victims abused by government authorities, on charges of infringing on the public order and religious values, opposing Saudi Arabia's intervention in Yemen, and related charges in September 2022. Prisoners of Conscience added that authorities had denied al-Nukheifi contact with his family since October 2022 and did not disclose his whereabouts.

The United Nations or Other International Bodies: According to an Amnesty International report released on August 1, the government failed to implement many of the 182 recommendations it had supported during its third UN Human Rights Council Universal Periodic Review in 2018, including ones to bring its counterterrorism and cybercrime laws in line with international standards; guarantee and protect the rights to freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly; release human rights defenders and all those imprisoned for exercising their rights to freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly; guarantee due process and fair trials; and protect workers from all forms of abuse.

Government Human Rights Bodies: The government officially had mechanisms to investigate and punish human rights abuses, but their effectiveness was limited. The HRC was part of the government and required permission from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs before meeting with diplomats, academics, or researchers with international human rights

organizations, even though the HRC president officially had ministerial status and reported to the king. The HRC worked directly with the Royal Court and the Council of Ministers, with a committee composed of representatives of the Shura Council and the Ministries of Labor and Social Development and Interior, and with the Shura Council committees for the judiciary, Islamic affairs, and human rights.

The HRC and NSHR were sometimes outspoken in areas deemed less politically sensitive, including combating child abuse, child marriage, and trafficking in persons. They avoided topics such as protests or cases of political activists that would require directly confronting government authorities but did inquire into some complaints of mistreatment by some high-profile political prisoners. The 18 full-time members of the HRC board included eight women and at least two Shia members; they received and responded to individual complaints, including those related to political prisoners as well as individual complaints related to persons with disabilities, religious freedom, women's rights, and other matters. The Shura Council's Human Rights Committee also actively followed cases and included women and Shia among its members.

The HRC and NSHR maintained records of complaints and outcomes, but privacy laws protected information concerning individual cases, and information was not publicly available.

The Board of Grievances, a high-level administrative judicial body that heard

cases against government entities and reported directly to the king, was the primary mechanism to seek redress for claims of abuse. During the year the Board of Grievances held hearings and adjudicated claims of wrongdoing, but there were no reported prosecutions of security force members for human rights violations. Military and security courts investigated an unknown number of abuses of authority and security force killings.

Citizens could report abuses by security forces at any police station or to the HRC or NSHR. Citizens and residents could also submit complaints regarding illegal detention or violations of detainee rights to the Public Prosecutor's office online, via a hotline telephone number, or in person.

A November report by MENA Rights Group, ALQST, and ESOHR criticized the HRC's effectiveness, citing its support for the government and lack of action on certain high-profile human rights cases.

Section 6. Discrimination and Societal Abuses

Women

Rape and Domestic Violence: Rape, including of men, was a criminal offense in the country under sharia with a wide range of penalties, from flogging to execution. The law did not specifically include provisions on spousal rape, domestic or intimate partner rape, and other forms of domestic and sexual violence including so-called corrective rape of LGBTQI+ persons, but they were criminalized under general rape and domestic abuse

laws. The government enforced the law based on its interpretation of sharia, and in some cases, courts punished victims as well as perpetrators for illegal “mixing of genders,” even when there was no conviction for rape. It was unclear whether the government enforced the law effectively due to lack of public data. Survivors had to prove with witnesses, surveillance cameras, a medical report, or the defendant’s confession that a rape was committed, and a woman’s testimony in court was not always accepted.

Due to these legal and social obstacles, authorities brought few cases to trial. Most rape cases were likely unreported because survivors faced societal and familial reprisal, including diminished marriage opportunities, criminal sanctions including imprisonment, or accusations of adultery or sexual relations outside of marriage, which were punishable under sharia. There were reports domestic abuse in the form of incest occurred but was seldom reported to authorities due to fears of societal repercussions, according to local sources.

The law against domestic violence defined domestic abuse broadly, to include spousal and child abuse, and criminalized domestic abuse with penalties of one month to one year of imprisonment or a fine unless a court provided a harsher sentence.

Researchers stated it was difficult to gauge the magnitude of domestic abuse, which they believed to be widespread. Recent studies varied widely, finding the rate of domestic abuse among women to be between 15 and 60

percent. The National Family Safety Program (NFSP), a quasi-governmental organization under the Ministry of National Guard, was charged with spreading awareness of and combating domestic violence, including child abuse, and it reported abuse cases.

It was unclear whether laws regarding domestic violence were enforced effectively because there was no publicly available information on complaints and prosecutions. Some women's rights advocates were critical of investigations of domestic violence, claiming investigators were hesitant to enter a home without permission from the male head of household, who could also be the perpetrator of violence. Activists reported the situation had improved in recent years, with greater awareness of resources for domestic violence survivors, such as the domestic violence hotline managed by the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development. They also noted a continued increase in authorities' willingness to investigate and prosecute domestic violence perpetrators but expressed concern that some police departments neglected domestic violence cases.

On March 5, Riyadh Province police announced they opened a probe into a video showing girls alleging their father beat and abused them and confined them to their home; based on that probe the father was arrested. No further information was available on the case as of year's end.

The government made some efforts to reduce domestic violence. The Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development administered

government-supported family protection shelters, although women reported that remaining in the shelters was not always voluntary. The Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development's Center for Protection Against Abuse ran a 24-hour hotline and shelters across the country with access to medical care for victims of sexual violence, while the quasi-governmental NFSP provided medical support to sexual abuse victims.

Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C): The official government interpretation of sharia prohibited the practice; however, a 2020 study by Equality Now, the most recent available, indicated up to 18 percent of women reported having undergone some type of FGM/C.

Other Forms of Gender-based Violence or Harassment: The extent of sexual harassment was difficult to measure, with little media reporting and no official government data. No statistics were available on the incidence of sexual harassment due to reluctance to report violations. Local media reported several incidents of harassment during the year. On January 21, Mecca police arrested a man seen in a video clip circulating on social media verbally harassing a woman.

The law criminalizing sexual harassment carried a maximum penalty of five years in prison and a substantial fine.

In September, the public prosecutor warned that harassment at workplaces, education institutions, and shelters was punishable by up to five years in prison, a fine, or both.

Discrimination: Women faced discrimination under both law and custom. A series of regulations issued from 2019 through 2021 eliminated most restrictions under the guardianship system and granted women many of the same rights as men pertaining to travel abroad, civil status, and employment. There were reports, however, that government and nongovernment entities, primarily in rural areas, continued to require women to obtain permission from a male guardian before providing government services.

In June, the government enacted a Civil Transactions Law it stated would clarify rules relating to civil lawsuits, limit judicial discretion, and implement transparent rules equally applicable to all individuals. The law mandated uniform rules for any assessment of damages that did not allow judges to take religion or gender into account. There was not enough information by year's end to assess the law's implementation.

By law women had equal rights to employment, and employee discrimination based on gender was officially prohibited.

On August 16, in furtherance of its phased coeducation initiative, the Ministry of Education permitted women to begin teaching boys in the fourth grade for the first time, in three government schools in three governorates, following 2019 reforms that had allowed women to teach boys up to the third grade in public schools.

While the HRC and NSHR stated women did not need male guardian

permission to leave prison after completion of their sentences, human rights advocates including Human Rights Watch reported some facilities still required a male guardian to accompany women upon release.

The law permitted women to transmit citizenship to their children under certain circumstances. The country's interpretation of sharia prohibited Muslim women from marrying non-Muslims, but Muslim men could marry non-Muslim women. Women required government permission to marry noncitizens; men had to obtain government permission if they intended to marry citizens from countries other than Gulf Cooperation Council-member states (Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates). Regulations prohibited men from marrying women from Bangladesh, Burma, Chad, and Pakistan. The government additionally required men wishing to marry a second wife who was a foreigner to submit documentation attesting to the fact that his first wife had a disability, had a chronic disease, or was sterile.

Cultural norms selectively enforced by managers of state institutions required women to wear an abaya (a loose-fitting, full-length cloak) in public. Women foreigners, like all men, were only required to dress "modestly."

In divorce proceedings, women had to demonstrate legally specified grounds for divorce, but men could divorce without giving cause, citing "irreconcilable differences." In doing so, men were required to pay

immediately an amount of money agreed at the time of the marriage that served as a one-time alimony payment. Men might be forced, however, to make subsequent alimony payments by court order.

A woman still needed a male guardian's permission to marry or would have to seek a court order in the case of *adhl* (men guardians refusing to approve the marriage of women under their charge). In such cases, the judge assumed the role of the guardian and could approve the marriage. Courts regularly executed marriage contracts for women whose men guardians refused to approve their marriage, according to informed judicial sources quoted by local media.

The 2022 Personal Status Law eliminated most restrictions on women's participation in society and discriminatory legal practices but still included concerning provisions. It continued the requirement that women obtain a male guardian's permission to marry. Married women were also required to obey their husbands in a "reasonable manner," with potential financial consequences for disobedience, and male guardians were granted legal guardianship of minor children after a divorce.

Courts routinely awarded custody of children when they attained a specified age (seven years for boys and nine years for girls) to the divorced husband or the deceased husband's family in cases when the couple was divorced or the father died. In some cases, former husbands reportedly prevented divorced noncitizen women from visiting their children. Under the Personal

Status Law, divorced women could travel with their children if they had a custody deed, according to the Jawazat.

Sharia-based inheritance laws discriminated against women, giving daughters one-half the inheritance awarded to their brothers.

Segregated education through the university level was standard. Some private universities, such as Faisal University, offered partially segregated classes with students receiving instruction from the same teacher and able to participate together in class discussion, but with the women and men physically separated by dividers. A few other government universities offered coeducation in selected programs, largely in the sciences. Private international and national schools could offer coeducation at any grade; most private international schools were coeducational, while most private national schools were segregated. Primary public schools offered mixed-gender education up to the third grade.

Reproductive Rights: There were no reports of coerced abortion or involuntary sterilization on the part of government authorities.

Premarital sex was illegal under sharia law, and hospitals and health centers could report extramarital pregnancies to police, including pregnancies that resulted from rape. Access to most contraceptives required a prescription, but condoms were available at pharmacies and supermarkets for over-the-counter purchase. Emergency contraceptives reportedly were available.

Governmental and quasi-governmental agencies provided medical care to sexual violence survivors as well as psychological and social support. There were some reports that domestic workers in areas outside of the major cities had more limited access due to language barriers. There were reportedly emergency contraceptives and postexposure prophylaxis available for survivors, but information was not available on whether they could easily be obtained.

Systemic Racial or Ethnic Violence and Discrimination

Although racial discrimination was illegal, members of marginalized racial and ethnic communities, including Black Saudis and descendants of former enslaved Africans in the country, faced widespread prejudice and discrimination in employment and society. Formal and informal discrimination also occurred against foreign workers from Africa and Asia. There were also reports of discrimination based on tribal or nontribal lineage.

Children

Birth Registration: In January, a royal decree amended the citizenship law, transferring final authority to grant citizenship from the minister of interior to the prime minister, a position held by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. The extent of the prime minister's influence on the naturalization process and its implications remained unclear. There were cases of

authorities denying public services to children of citizen parents, including education and health care, because the government failed to register the birth entirely or had not registered it immediately, sometimes because the father failed to report the birth or did not receive authorization to marry a foreigner. Children of women who were married to foreign spouses received permanent residency, but their residency status was revocable in the event of the death of the mother.

Child Abuse: Child abuse was a crime punishable by one year's imprisonment, a fine, or both. The government did not publicly report prosecutions so it was unknown whether authorities enforced the law effectively. The NFSP operated a helpline dedicated to assisting children in matters ranging from bullying to abuse, providing counseling, tracking, and referrals to social services. On January 22, the NFSP reported the Saudi Child Helpline received 350 calls in 2022. The Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development had 17 social protection units across the country providing social protection to children younger than 18, as well as other vulnerable populations suffering domestic violence and abuse.

Child, Early, and Forced Marriage: The law stated the minimum age for marriage was 18; those younger than that age could marry only with court approval. The government did not publicly report prosecutions so it was unknown whether authorities enforced the law effectively. According to local media, the court ensured several conditions were met before approving a marriage contract for a bride or groom younger than 18,

including assessing their psychosocial development and hearing statements from the potential bride, groom, and guardians to determine consent. The HRC and NSHR monitored cases of child marriages, which they reported were rare or at least rarely reported, and took steps to prevent consummation of such marriages. The application for a marriage license had to record the bride's age, and registration of the marriage was a legal prerequisite for consummation.

Sexual Exploitation of Children: The law prohibited the sale, grooming, or use of children for commercial sexual exploitation, including sex trafficking. The government did not publicly report prosecutions so it was unknown whether authorities enforced the law effectively. The law stipulated a punishment for such crimes, including the preparation, publication, and promotion of material for pornographic sites, of at least two and one-half years' imprisonment or a substantial fine if the crime included the exploitation of children. The law did not define a minimum age for consensual sex.

On July 25, the public prosecution announced it ordered the arrest and referral to the Public Prosecutor's Office of a man who appeared in an online video sexually abusing a child. The announcement noted the exploitation and abuse of children required strict criminal accountability.

On September 10, the public prosecution warned against producing, publishing, circulating, displaying, or possessing any printed, visual, or audio

work that would encourage a child to deviate from “Islamic Shariah law, public order, or public morals.”

Antisemitism

There were no known data on Jewish citizens and no statistics available concerning the religious denominations of foreigners.

Cases of government-employed imams using antisemitic language in their sermons were generally rare but occurred more frequently during periods of conflict between Palestinians and Israelis. The Ministry of Islamic Affairs issued periodic circulars to clerics and imams in mosques directing them to include messages on the principles of justice, equality, and tolerance, and to encourage rejection of bigotry and all forms of racial discrimination in their sermons.

The October 7 Hamas attack on Israel and ensuing Israel-Hamas conflict led to a resurgence of antisemitic rhetoric. On October 13, Sheikh Ahmed bin Hameed bin Talib praised the “martyrs” who sacrificed their lives for the sake of God and referred to their enemies as “the killers of prophets,” an antisemitic phrase the religious establishment phased out in recent years under government pressure.

In its annual report published in May on education in the country, the Institute for Monitoring Peace and Cultural Tolerance in School Education, an NGO, noted the government made progress in removing antisemitic

content from textbooks, although some problematic content remained.

According to the report, Israel was still omitted from maps in textbooks, and Zionism was still described as “racist.”

For further information on incidents of antisemitism in the country, whether or not those incidents were motivated by religion, and for reporting on the ability of Jews to exercise freedom of religion or belief, please see the Department of State’s *International Religious Freedom Report* at <https://www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/>.

Trafficking in Persons

See the Department of State’s annual *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

Acts of Violence, Criminalization, and Other Abuses Based on Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity or Expression, or Sex Characteristics

Criminalization: Under sharia, as interpreted in the country, consensual same-sex sexual conduct was punishable by death or flogging, depending on the perceived seriousness of the case. There were no known reports of prosecutions of LGBTQI+ persons for same-sex sexual conduct during the year, but widespread stigmatization and discrimination existed. It was illegal for men “to behave like women” or to wear women’s clothes, and vice

versa. The government did not actively enforce these laws, except when individuals posted photographs of so-called cross-dressing on social media. There were no known prosecutions under these laws during the year. Publicly advocating for the human rights of LGBTQI+ persons was illegal, and advocates faced arrest and imprisonment.

On May 17, LGBTQI+ rights activist Tariq bin Aziz, who was living in exile in the United States, revealed in an online video that plainclothes police officers arrested him in Saudi Arabia in 2021 and that he received a sentence of one-year's imprisonment and a fine of 10,000 riyals (\$2,670). The court further ordered that his mobile phones be confiscated, his account on X be shut down, and the judgment be published in local newspapers over charges related to complaining on a TikTok video regarding being harassed by police for supposedly looking too feminine. He returned to the United States after serving his sentence.

Violence and Harassment: There were reports of physical violence and harassment based on sexual orientation or gender identity. There were no known cases during the year of police or other government agents inciting, perpetrating, condoning, or tolerating violence against LGBTQI+ individuals or those reporting such abuse.

Discrimination: The law did not prohibit discrimination by state and nonstate actors based on sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, or sex characteristics and did not recognize LGBTQI+ individuals, couples,

and their families. There were reports of official and societal discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity in employment, housing, education, and health care. Clerics condemned homosexuality during government-approved Friday sermons at some mosques.

During the year local newspapers featured opinion pieces condemning homosexuality and calling on authorities to punish harshly individuals engaging in same-sex relations.

In March, international media reported a Saudi transgender woman who had been studying in the United States committed suicide after being lured back to Saudi Arabia and forced to detransition.

In April, international media reported some LGBTQI+ citizens had been forced into exile, believing they were left with no option but to flee the country. One person interviewed said that soon after he came out as gay, he was effectively detained by his parents and brothers, confined to a room, beaten by his father and brothers, and barred from attending his university classes.

Availability of Legal Gender Recognition: The country did not permit individuals to change gender identity markers, and citizens who were transgender or gender nonconforming faced widespread stigma and discrimination.

Involuntary or Coercive Medical or Psychological Practices: There was

anecdotal reporting of the existence and use of so-called conversion therapy practices on LGBTQI+ persons, but further information was not available from government or other sources. “Normalization” surgeries were not allowed in the country.

Restrictions of Freedom of Expression, Association, or Peaceful Assembly:

LGBTQI+ organizations and advocacy regarding LGBTQI+ issues were illegal. The government did not allow any such organization to operate nor were there reported LGBTQI+ rights advocacy events of any kind.

On June 14, *Al-Monitor* reported the government’s decision not to permit the showing of the new Spider-Man film “could relate to LGBTQ content in the movie.”

Persons with Disabilities

The law mandated the state to “protect human rights in accordance with Islamic law,” which according to the Authority for Persons with Disabilities included “justice, equity, and antidiscrimination on any grounds, including disability.” Based on a 2021 government requirement, both public and private institutions were obliged to meet certain accessibility requirements, and there were no reports of complaints during the year regarding inaccessibility or discrimination.

The Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development was responsible for protecting the rights of persons with disabilities. Children with

disabilities could attend government-supported schools. In April 2022, the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development issued digital cards for persons with autism and other disabilities to benefit from its digital services. The “Digital Autism” card helped identify the beneficiaries and facilitate their movement in public places while also providing access to priority services when visiting hospitals, health-care centers and other public facilities. The “Digital Erkab” card for persons with disabilities provided eligibility for concessions in ticket fares and travel fees while using public transportation.

The ministry issued a *Mowaamah* certificate as an accreditation for organizations wishing to make their work environments inclusive and more supportive of persons with disabilities.

Other Societal Violence or Discrimination

Social, legal, economic, and political discrimination against the country’s Shia minority continued. See the Department of State’s *International Religious Freedom Report* at <https://www.state.gov/international-religious-freedom-reports/>. Reporting indicated Shia faced discrimination in employment, especially when trying to be employed in the Ministry of Defense, Ministry of Interior, and National Guard, and particularly for positions where they would be permitted to hold a firearm.

On June 2, in a report regarding the execution of two Bahraini Shia men,

Jaafar Sultan and Sadeq Thamer, HRW stated Saudi Arabia's Shia Muslim minority had long suffered systemic discrimination and been targeted by state-funded hate speech.

To address the problem, the Ministries of Defense and Interior and the National Guard included antidiscrimination training in courses offered by the King Abdulaziz Center for National Dialogue for police and other law enforcement officers.

Section 7. Worker Rights

a. Freedom of Association and the Right to Collective Bargaining

The law did not provide for the right of workers to form and join independent unions; however, trade unions and labor committees existed. The law did not provide for the right to collective bargaining or the right to conduct legal strikes. Workers faced potential dismissal, imprisonment, or, in the case of migrant workers, deportation for unsanctioned union activities.

The government allowed citizen-only labor committees in workplaces with more than 100 employees, was heavily involved in their formation, and placed undue limitations on freedom of association and activities of these committees. For example, the Ministry of Human Resources and Social

Development approved the committee members and authorized ministry and employer representatives to attend committee meetings. Committee members were required to submit meeting minutes to management and then transmit them to the minister; the ministry could dissolve committees if they violated regulations or were deemed to threaten public security. Committees' recommendations to company management were limited to improvements to working conditions, health and safety, productivity, and training programs.

The law did not prohibit antiunion discrimination or require reinstatement of workers fired for union activity. There was little information on government efforts to enforce applicable laws.

b. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

See the Department of State's annual *Trafficking in Persons Report* at: <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

c. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment

The law prohibited the employment of any child in the worst forms of child labor defined in the relevant international conventions. The National Policy to Prevent Child Labor and a corresponding National Action Plan provided that no person younger than 15 could legally work unless that person was

the sole source of support for the family. Children between ages 13 to 15 could conduct light work if it did not interfere with their schooling. Children younger than 18 could not work shifts exceeding six hours a day. There was no minimum age for workers employed in family-owned businesses or other areas considered extensions of the household, such as farming, herding, and domestic service.

There was little data on government efforts to effectively enforce applicable laws and whether penalties were commensurate with or less than those for analogous serious crimes when applied against violators. There was no available data reporting whether child labor occurred.

d. Discrimination (see section 6)

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

Wage and Hour Laws: There was no private sector minimum wage.

Bilateral agreements determined the minimum wage for foreign workers in the country. The monthly minimum wage for public-sector employees was above the estimated poverty income level. There was no private-sector minimum wage for foreign workers.

By law a standard workday was eight hours. A standard workweek was 48 hours but could extend to 60 hours subject to payment of overtime, which was 50 percent more than the basic wage. The law required employers to provide paid holidays on Eid al-Fitr, Eid al-Adha, and Saudi National Day,

with the exception of domestic workers sponsored by individuals rather than companies.

Foreign workers made up approximately 75 percent of the labor force, according to the first quarter labor market survey. Legal workers generally negotiated and agreed to terms of employment prior to their arrival in accordance with the contract requirements contained in the law.

The law provided penalties for bringing foreigners into the country to work in any service, including domestic service, without following the required procedures and obtaining a permit.

Occupational Safety and Health: The government issued occupational safety and health (OSH) standards that were appropriate for the main industries. The law provided for regular safety inspections and enabled ministry-appointed inspectors to make unannounced inspections, initiate sanctions, examine materials used or handled in industrial and other operations, and submit samples of suspected hazardous materials or substances to government laboratories. There was a ban on outside work from 12 p.m. to 3 p.m. during the summer months.

Responsibility for identifying unsafe situations remained with OSH experts and not the worker. By law employers were obligated to safeguard safety and health requirements in the workplace to protect employees from harm and disease. Regulations required employers to protect some categories of workers from job-related hazards and disease, although violations occurred.

The law did not provide workers the right to remove themselves from a hazardous workplace without jeopardizing their employment.

Wage, Hour, and OSH Enforcement: The Ministry of Health's Occupational Health Service Directorate and the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development worked together on health and safety matters. There was little information on government efforts to enforce applicable laws and whether penalties imposed were commensurate with those for similar crimes such as fraud and negligence. Punishment for labor violations involved a range of fines and the possible temporary or permanent closure of a business.

OSH regulations did not cover farmers, herdsmen, domestic workers, or workers in family-operated businesses. Although the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development employed nearly 1,000 labor inspectors, foreign workers privately reported frequent failures to enforce OSH standards.

According to the law, a citizen or business had to sponsor foreign workers for them to obtain legal work and residency status, although the requirement exempted Syrian and Yemeni citizens who overstayed their visas. Some workers, unaware of 2022 regulations easing their ability to switch employers, were forced to remain with their sponsor until completion of their contract. There were also instances in which sponsors bringing foreign workers into the country failed to provide them with a

residency permit, which undermined workers' ability to access government services or navigate the court system in the event of grievances.

There were reports some migrant workers were employed on terms to which they had not agreed and experienced problems, such as delays in the payment of wages, inability to change employers, or changes in working hours and conditions. There were reports migrant workers, especially domestic workers, were vulnerable to abuse, exploitation, and conditions contravening labor laws, including nonpayment of wages, working for periods in excess of the 48-hour workweek, working for periods longer than the prescribed eight-hour workday without due compensation, and restrictions on movement due to passport confiscation. There were also reports of physical, psychological, sexual, and verbal abuse. Domestic workers were unable to remove themselves from dangerous situations.

Some employers physically prevented workers from leaving or threatened them with nonpayment of wages if they left. Sponsoring employers, who controlled foreign workers' ability to remain employed in the country, usually held foreign workers' passports, a practice prohibited by law. In some contract disputes, to prevent the employee from leaving the country until resolution of the dispute, sponsors asked authorities to coerce the employee into accepting a disadvantageous settlement in lieu of risking deportation without any settlement.

While some foreign workers were able to contact the labor offices of their

embassies for assistance, domestic workers faced impediments when attempting to gain access to their embassies, including restrictions on their freedom of movement and telephone access, confiscation of their passports, and being subjected to threats and verbal, sexual, and physical abuse by their employers.

It was difficult to determine the size of the informal sector, but estimates stated expatriate workers accounted for approximately 23 percent of GDP. It was unclear if the government enforced labor laws in this sector due to lack of transparency.