

Saudi Arabia 2024 Human Rights Report

Executive Summary

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

Significant human rights issues included credible reports of: arbitrary or unlawful killings; disappearances; torture and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment; arbitrary arrest and detention; transnational repression against individuals in another country; serious restrictions on freedom of expression and media freedom, including unjustified arrests or prosecutions of journalists and censorship; restrictions of religious freedom; and prohibiting independent trade unions or significant or systemic restrictions on workers' freedom of association.

The government did not take credible steps or action to identify and punish officials who committed human rights abuses in a verifiable way.

Section 1. Life

a. Extrajudicial Killings

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

The law permitted capital punishment for a range of nonviolent offenses, including apostasy, “sorcery,” and adultery. Death sentences for such practices were rare, however, and often were reduced on appeal. The law also allowed capital punishment for nonviolent terrorism-related offenses, and authorities carried out multiple executions for such crimes during the year. 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 they committed the crimes as minors. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), including the European-Saudi Organization for Human Rights (ESOHR), highlighted that the government executed persons sentenced for drug-related offenses and offenses committed while they were minors.

On June 5, the Mixed Migration Centre (MMC), an international network carrying out research and analysis on migration, reported that Saudi security forces on the border with Yemen indiscriminately fired upon and killed Yemenis, Ethiopians, and others attempting to enter the country as recently as March. When gunfire failed to deter border crossings, MCC alleged, authorities arrested large groups of migrants and took them to jails where they faced torture, beatings, and sexual abuse.

b. Coercion in Population Control

There were no reports of coerced abortion or involuntary sterilization on the

part of government authorities.

Section 2. Liberty

a. Freedom of the Press

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 internet sites, according to local media. There were frequent reports of restrictions on free speech.

Authorities routinely 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. 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, including MENA Rights Group, 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.

Bloomberg reported the government made a number of arrests for online posts regarding the Israel-Hamas war, which the report stated the government interpreted as criticism of itself and potential normalization with Israel.

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 government reportedly collected information concerning the identity of persons peacefully expressing political, religious, or ideological opinions or beliefs online. 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 them to prison.

On February 14, UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders Mary Lawlor released a letter she sent to the government in December 2023 expressing concern regarding the detention of fitness instructor and women’s rights activist Manahel al-Otaibi, which she described as “an express act of retaliation against [al-Otaibi’s] social media activism for the advancement and defense of women’s rights.” On April 26, ALQST for Human Rights and other human rights organizations reported al-Otaibi faced inhuman conditions in solitary confinement in Malaz Prison in Riyadh while detained incommunicado from November 2023, to April 14, when she informed her family by telephone she had a broken leg after being brutally beaten in detention and had been denied medical care. She also told her family she believed her solitary confinement was in retaliation for her sister Fawzia al-Otaibi’s campaigning to release her from prison. On November 5, ALQST reported the Specialized Criminal Court (SCC) Court of Appeal upheld the SCC’s January 9 sentence of al-Otaibi to 11 years’ imprisonment for “terrorist” offenses.

International NGOs, academics, and the press claimed the government subjected journalists, writers, and bloggers to violence, harassment, and intimidation, including through the use of automated social media accounts.

In July, five international rights organizations, including the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), called for the release of various journalists and online content creators, including Palestinian podcaster Hatem al-Najjar, who was reportedly detained for social media posts made before reaching adulthood. As of late 2023, CPJ reported that 10 journalists remained in custody.

Censorship by Governments, Military, Intelligence, or Police Forces, Criminal Groups, or Armed Extremist or Rebel Groups

The law restricted printed materials, printing presses, bookstores, television and radio, foreign media offices and their correspondents, online newspapers and journals, and the import, rental, and sale of films. All newspapers, blogs, and websites in the country required government licenses. Media were 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 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 sanctioned 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, 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 it 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 May 2, Bloomberg reported that since October 7, 2023, authorities “stepped up” the arrest of citizens for social media posts critical of Israel’s actions, including in the Israel-Hamas war. According to Bloomberg, the detainees included an executive working for a company involved in Vision 2030, the country’s long-term economic development strategy, and an individual who reportedly urged citizens to boycott American brands sold in the country. No official records indicated how many arrests took place during the year of persons expressing concerns regarding the Israel-Hamas

war.

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.

On October 14, human rights NGO Sanad reported the SCC sentenced caricaturist Mohamed Ahmed al-Hazzaa al-Ghamdi to 23 years in prison, with no possibility of appeal, regarding caricatures published by Qatari newspaper *Lusail* during the Saudi-led 2017-21 blockade on Qatar. Al-Ghamdi reportedly was not permitted legal representation during his trial. He was arrested in 2018 and initially sentenced in 2021 to six years in prison

and a travel ban but was not released at the end of that sentence.

Authorities reopened the case against him in December 2023, charging him with sympathizing with Qatar, publishing drawings that insulted Saudi Arabia, and following opposition accounts on X.

b. Worker Rights

Freedom of Association and 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.

Forced or Compulsory Labor

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

Acceptable Work Conditions

Wage and Hour Laws

The minimum wage for citizens in the private and public sectors was above the estimated poverty income level. Bilateral agreements determined the minimum wage for foreign workers in the country. 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, Saudi National Day, and Founding Day, with the exception of domestic workers sponsored by

individuals rather than companies.

Foreign workers made up approximately 70 percent of the labor force, according to the second 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.

Diplomats reported domestic workers experienced nonpayment of salaries and excessive workloads.

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, which included construction, fossil fuels, electricity, water, mines, and manufacturing. 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. In February human rights organizations reported the government gradually lowered fines and penalties for labor law violations. Local news media reported in October that the government regularly sanctioned violators.

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. There were 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.

The Building and Wood Workers' International trade union filed a complaint to the International Labor Organization in June, alleging migrant workers in the country were subject to labor rights abuses including failing to pay wages, passport confiscation, illegal recruitment fees, debt bondage, and preventing workers freely changing jobs.

It was difficult to determine the size of the informal sector. It was unclear if the government enforced labor laws in this sector due to lack of transparency.

c. Disappearance and Abduction

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.

The family of human rights defender Mohammed al-Qahtani received a telephone call from him on November 3, after two years and three months of enforced disappearance. Authorities had not released al-Qahtani at year's end despite his having completed a 10-year sentence in November 2022.

On August 6, the website Together for Justice reported authorities forcibly disappeared blind poet Samir Ali al-Muslim on March 21. According to Shia Rights Watch, authorities arrested al-Muslim in his home in Qatif following recitation of a prayer for the release of detainees. His whereabouts remained unknown at year's end.

On August 21, Prisoners of Conscience reported authorities had released Yemeni human rights activist Samira al-Houri, who had been forcibly disappeared more than two years earlier.

Prolonged Detention without Charges

The law provided that no entity could restrict a person's actions or imprison a person, except under the provisions of the law. The law 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 could not challenge the lawfulness of their detention before a court. In the case of wrongful detention, the law provided for the right to compensation if the Public Prosecutor's Office found detainees had been held unlawfully.

On June 25, *Middle East Eye* reported authorities detained Egyptian lawyer Islam Osama Sobhi after he posted a video online "criticizing the alleged neglect that led to the deaths of hundreds of Egyptian pilgrims" during Hajj. *Middle East Eye* noted Sobhi had cancer, citing his father, who called on authorities to provide him medical care. On August 30, Sanad stated Sobhi remained in detention and called for his release. There were no further updates as of the end of the year.

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 UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention released a formal opinion on

September 19 finding the 2019 detention of Shia businessman Saud bin Mohammed bin Ali al-Faraj for allegedly participating in antigovernment demonstrations in Qatif, running a terrorist cell, killing police officers, and other alleged offenses, was arbitrary and lacked legal basis. The Working Group also held the death sentence the SCC imposed in 2022 on al-Faraj, who remained in detention at year's end, was based on the counterterrorism law's vague and broad definition of terrorism.

d. Violations in Religious Freedom

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

e. Trafficking in Persons

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

Section 3. Security of the Person

a. Torture and Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

The law officially prohibited torture and made officers responsible for criminal investigations liable for any abuse of authority. Sharia, 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 April 26, 11 NGOs, including ALQST for Human Rights and Middle East Democracy Center (MEDC), released a statement stating that authorities routinely subject “prisoners of conscience, and others arbitrarily detained, to solitary confinement and incommunicado detention”, and prisoners regularly experience abuse by other prisoners and guards and medical neglect.

On April 30, 30 human rights organizations, including MENA Rights Group and the ESOHR, claimed in a joint statement that authorities subjected seven defendants younger than 18 to enforced disappearance, solitary confinement for months, and various forms of torture, among other abuses while in detention. The organizations added that individuals charged for acts related to their peaceful activism were usually convicted solely based on torture-tainted confessions.

Impunity for security forces remained a serious problem. The Public

Prosecutor's Office, which reported to the king, was responsible for investigating improper security force actions and pursuing prosecutions. There were reports of abuses during interrogations despite the presence of surveillance cameras in Ministry of Interior interrogation rooms. There were no reports such video monitoring led to accountability for abuses. The government provided human rights training to security forces, but NGOs reported widespread torture and other abuses.

The UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities found on May 15 that the prolonged solitary confinement of religious scholar and critic Safar bin Abdulrahman al-Hawali without trial or necessary accommodations for disabilities related to various medical conditions constituted serious human rights violations, including torture, arbitrary detention, inhuman or degrading treatment, and lack of respect for his physical and mental integrity. The committee published its decision after reviewing a complaint filed in 2020 by al-Hawali's nephew claiming his uncle's 2018 arrest and detention, which continued at year's end, were punishment for his criticism of the crown prince in a book he published. There were reports authorities caused prisoner deaths by withholding medical treatment and mistreated prisoners with disabilities.

In an April 15 statement, 18 human rights organizations, including ALQST for Human Rights and Gulf Centre for Human Rights, reported Dhahban Prison personnel subjected human rights lawyer Waleed Abu al-Khair to

mistreatment that included solitary confinement, sleep deprivation, restricted visits, and denial of food, medications, and inadequate medical care after he was repeatedly beaten by another inmate.

Activists questioned the impartiality of procedures to investigate detainee complaints of torture and maltreatment. The governmental Human Rights Commission, which was responsible for coordinating with other government entities to investigate and respond to alleged human rights abuses, and the quasi-governmental National Society for Human Rights 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 official government interpretation of sharia prohibited the practice of female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C); however, a 2020 study by the NGO Equality Now, the most recent available, indicated up to 18 percent of women reported having undergone some type of FGM/C.

b. Protection of Children

Child Labor

The law prohibited the employment of any child in the worst forms of child

labor as defined in the Worst Forms of Child Labor Convention of 1999. 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 13 and 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. The law provided that hazardous operations, such as the use of power-operated machinery, or harmful industries, such as mines and quarries, could not employ children. 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 crimes, such as kidnapping. There were no available data reporting whether child labor occurred.

Child Marriage

The law stated the minimum age for marriage was 18, but individuals older than 15 could marry 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 governmental Human Rights Commission and quasi-governmental National Society for Human Rights 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.

c. Protection to 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.

Provision of First Asylum

The law provided that the “state will grant political asylum if public interest so dictates.” 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 individuals with this status to possess valid identity documents throughout the duration of their stay.

Authorities sometimes indefinitely detained individuals who lacked travel documents but typically did not deport them if UNHCR recognized them as asylum seekers and refugees. 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 legal residency to leave, and it threatened or imposed deportation. Access to naturalization was difficult for refugees.

The government did not recognize the right of its own citizens to petition for access to asylum or refugee status in foreign countries. The law penalized citizens who sought such status in foreign countries. On June 21, local media reported the country currently hosted more than 1.76 million refugees and asylum seekers (including individuals from Yemen and Syria as well as Rohingya Muslims from Myanmar) on temporary visitor status, according to the King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Center.

In June, the MMC reported migrants who survived crossing the border with Yemen between September 2023 and March testified that border guards had regularly fired upon them with live ammunition. Those who were caught reported authorities had beaten, tortured, and sexually abused them in detention centers prior to deportation. The MMC reported border guards used threats and intimidation to persuade the migrants to return to Yemen.

The government restricted access to the border region throughout the year, citing the danger of skirmishes between Saudi and Houthi forces, limiting the ability of the United Nations and NGOs to investigate reports of human rights abuses by security forces against refugees, asylum seekers, and other migrants.

d. Acts of Antisemitism and Antisemitic Incitement

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 2023 Hamas attack on Israel and ensuing Israel-Hamas conflict led to a rise in religiously intolerant hate speech and expression, including a resurgence of antisemitic rhetoric. In its annual report published in May on education in the country, the NGO Institute for Monitoring Peace and Cultural Tolerance in School Education noted the government removed nearly all antisemitic and anti-Israel material from its schoolbooks. Israel

was still omitted from maps, however, and referred to as “the Israeli occupation” or “Israeli occupiers” in textbooks, according to the report.

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, see the Department of State’s *International Religious Freedom Report* at <https://www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/>.

e. Instances of Transnational Repression

The government engaged in acts of transnational repression, and human rights groups stated it knowingly cooperated with other governments to facilitate their acts of transnational repression.

Extraterritorial Killing, Kidnapping, or Violence or Threats of Violence

In August, the BBC, Agence France Presse, and other news organizations reported that Saudi authorities might have abducted Lolita Safeeraldeen from Australia, where she had fled in 2022 to escape an abusive marriage, and forced her to return to the country. Flight records reportedly showed Lolita flew from Melbourne to Kuala Lumpur in May 2023, but her final flight destination could not be verified. Her lawyer and family believed she was forcibly returned to Saudi Arabia and detained. The Australian

federal police's investigation into the matter, begun in June according to France 24, continued at year's end.

Threats, Harassment, Surveillance, or Coercion

According to a February 29 Freedom House report, surveillance was extensive within the country, and the government also subjected citizens living and traveling abroad to spying and intimidation. Freedom House stated, "The government maintained an extensive system of social media surveillance and regulation" and created automated "bot" and other accounts to target prominent social media users.

According to a May 3 Reporters without Borders (RSF) report, 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.

In a July 18 article in *The Guardian* regarding government transnational threats against activists in exile, United Kingdom-based women's rights activist Fawzia al-Otaibi, sister of jailed activist Manahel al-Otaibi, said she received death threats almost every day saying, "They will poison [her] and send people loyal to their homeland to kill [her] at any cost." On October 2, *The Guardian* reported the government had targeted Fawzia and her sisters Manahel and Maryam with a campaign of arrests, threats, and intimidation after they posted messages concerning female empowerment and were

among the first to use the hashtag #IAmMyOwnGuardian calling for an end to the male guardianship system. Fawzia told *The Guardian* she believed authorities were punishing Manahel in her stead.

On July 18, *The Guardian* reported the government targeted exiles living in the United Kingdom with a barrage of threats and abuse after they spoke out on human rights and the jailing of women's rights activists in their native country. In one case, a knife was left outside the London home of human rights activist Yahya Assiri, and his wife and son were separately approached and told that they could seek help from their embassy if they disagreed with his views. According to the report, exiles in the United Kingdom and elsewhere said authorities were targeting their family members still living in the country to coerce them to return home.

On October 11, the United Kingdom High Court issued an order affirming Assiri had standing to bring the case he filed in May accusing the government of Saudi Arabia of using spyware against him between 2018 and 2020. The case had not been decided by year's end.

Human Rights Watch stated in a December 13 report that "authorities often retaliate against the family members of critics and dissidents abroad in an effort to coerce them to return to 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.

A Freedom House report in August documented how authorities deliberately obstructed efforts by high-profile exiles to renew their passports at consulates overseas. Khalid al-Jabri, son of a former high-ranking intelligence official, and Abdullah al-Odah, director of the Middle East Democracy Center and son of detained cleric Salman al-Odah, said they were denied consular services in the United States and told to return to Saudi Arabia to renew their passports, which they regarded as an attempt to lure them back to the country. Al-Odah added that the embassy in Washington issued him a one-way ticket, which he declined to use.

Knowing Cooperation with Other Governments to Facilitate Their Acts of Transnational Repression

On December 2, MEDC stated Egyptian citizen Ahmed Fathi Kamal Kamel was at imminent risk of deportation from Saudi Arabia to Egypt following his arrest on November 13, assessing he would be at risk of torture and other human rights violations there. An Egyptian criminal court sentenced Kamel in absentia in 2021 to life imprisonment on charges stemming from his protest activity in 2011 and 2014. MEDC called for an immediate halt to

Kamel's extradition proceedings, which it claimed would violate of the principle of nonrefoulement under international law, and urged authorities to release him. Kamel had not been deported at year's end.