



GRANT LIBERTY

Saudi Prisoners of Conscience
Report 2020/21

WAR ON FREEDOM

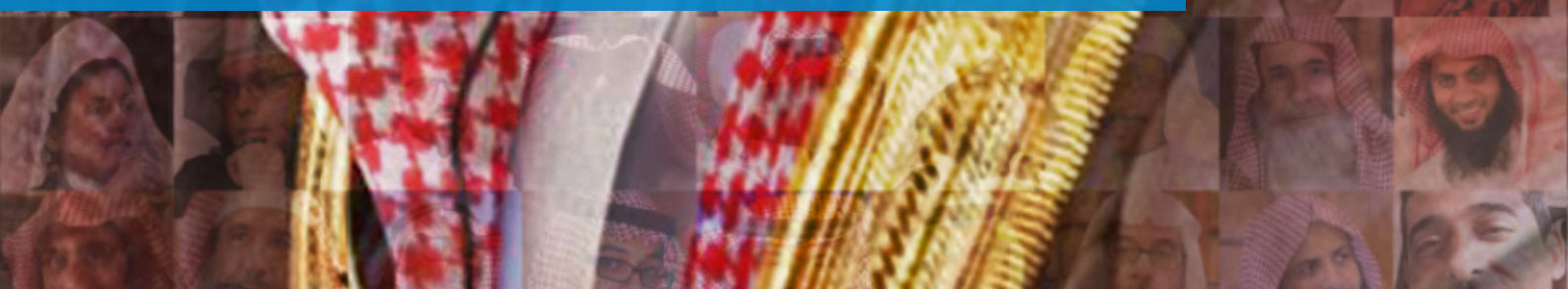


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GRANT LIBERTY

Grant Liberty is a London-based non-profit organisation which aims to stand and fight for human rights worldwide. Grant Liberty is the official advocacy wing of Forgotten Women, a global voice for those who have been silenced.

OUR VALUES

Grant Liberty is an official global voice for those who have been silenced, oppressed and imprisoned. Our core values are based on fundamental beliefs as follows:

- ✓ Justice
- ✓ Freedom
- ✓ Equality
- ✓ Dignity
- ✓ Security
- ✓ Accountability

We aim to provide liberty for all regardless of race, colour and belief, to hold to account those who have forced injustice on the innocent. We do this by lobbying, raising awareness, engaging in global coverage, petitioning and involving national and international courts to fight against global oppression.

We expect individuals, groups, communities and governments to uphold these values in every corner of the globe. Wherever there is an infringement of these values, we shall aim to address them.

Grant Liberty is funded by private donors from the UK, US and EU. It does not receive funding from any government.

Founded:

2016

Headquarters:

London, United Kingdom



Forgotten Women

Forgotten Women is a charity run by women for women, a charity dedicated to helping women in crisis and emergencies. The charity was set up after witnessing first-hand the 'sex for aid' and manipulation of women in vulnerable situations.

We envision a world where every woman is given the opportunity to live a life free from humiliation, poverty and abuse. A world in which women are free to preserve their dignity, health, well-being and economic independence.

“Advocacy is an integral part of our overall mission, you cannot be an humanitarian and ignore the global struggle for basic rights

Miss Sundeep Bahia.
Founder



There are individuals, groups and communities worldwide whose basic human rights have been denied, who suffer in silence, whether because of extreme torture, abuse or deprived of their freedom. For this reason the birth of Grant Liberty was inevitable.

Saladin Ali, CEO - Grant Liberty





FOREWORD

SALADIN ALI, CEO, GRANT LIBERTY

Grant Liberty fights for communities around the world whose human rights are being trampled and whose voices are being silenced. It is only natural, therefore, that we begin with prisoners of conscience.

In Saudi Arabia today, activists are languishing in jail for the crime of wanting a better world. They have been tortured, forced into hunger strikes and sexually assaulted, held in solitary confinement for months on end and separated from their families. Many still await charge years after their arrest, and some have seen their family members and lawyers follow them into prison.

This report seeks to provide a comprehensive analysis of the position of prisoners of conscience in Saudi Arabia – from the campaigning that led

to their arrest, to the barbaric treatment they have suffered and the legal position they face. We include new data providing insight into the bigger picture alongside individual testimonies detailing the very real personal torment from the family members of those in prison.

The ultimate cause of this report is Saudi Arabia's monarchy run by prince Muhammad bin Salman, the son of the 83-year-old King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud. They can both be considered as joint heads of state and the government, with the 35-year-old son in overall charge of affairs.

The king has been in power since the death of his brother in 2015; his son has been running all affairs of the Kingdom since 2017. They are both heavily influenced by fear of the Arab spring and the rising

demand for democracy across the Middle East and North Africa. The changes in Tunisia and Egypt led directly to recent moves in Saudi Arabia and the Emirates in order to protect their monarchies.

A boycott of Qatar and Turkey began in April 2017 and a decree was issued to all prominent figures in the Kingdom to support the move and speak against the state of Qatar in clear terms with open criticism.

At the same time a major crackdown began against those who opposed the rising tension between the various states and sought a more peaceful and conciliatory approach. Dozens of influential clerics and intellectuals were detained which signalled the start of a sweeping repression on the expression of thoughts and opinions.

The bloggers, activists, academics and religious scholars imprisoned are 'charged' with acting on behalf of "foreign parties against the security of the kingdom" and accused of having ties to groups like the Muslim Brotherhood. Several of those detained and still serving sentences without trials are for the 'criminal act' of sending tweets calling for reconciliation or concern for those imprisoned for thought crimes.

Human rights issues that existed in the past have now escalated to alarming proportions which include unlawful killings; executions for non-violent offences; forced renditions; forced disappearances; and torture of prisoners and detainees by government agents. We have also seen ransoming and the arrest and torture of family members.

The crackdown has led to arbitrary arrest and detention; the mass arrest of political prisoners – including for acts committed as children; restrictions on freedoms of peaceful assembly, association, and movement; severe restrictions of religious freedom; trafficking in persons; violence and further persecution of women, although new women's rights initiatives were implemented, many of the champions of women's right are imprisoned for the exact causes that have now been accorded. Saudis are not granted the

freedom and constitutional recourse to choose their government through free and fair elections.

This report seeks to highlight abuses and put into context the scale of human rights violations against those who are the very essence of Saudi Arabia – its citizens. A fairer society is not simply accorded by giving its citizens access to 'freedom toys' like cinema, concerts, and shopping malls but the basic of right to choose their individual, societal and national political and social direction.

But this report is no counsel of despair – it ends with a plan. As the Saudi government continues its PR-led campaign towards acceptance as a fully-fledged member of the international community – this project seeks to provide the basis for those who believe in human rights to insist on the release of these prisoners as the minimum price of admission.

In November 2020, Saudi Arabia will host the G20. Already we have seen the leaders of some of the world's great cities boycott the U20 Mayors' Summit, and we have seen recent attempts at 'sportswashing' – notably the proposed purchase of Newcastle United Football Club – fall apart. We believe that campaigning works, that media pressure works, and that the Saudi authorities can be made to see sense.

We need to build the deepest and broadest coalition possible to fight for change. In that spirit I would like to thank everyone who has contributed to the publication of this report, particularly Lina al-Hathloul, Areej al-Sadhan, Abdullah Alaoudah and Adbullah al-Ghamdi who have written movingly about their loved ones and their conditions, and I would like to thank our friends across civil society who have taken the time to look at this report and offer their kind thoughts and comments.

This report is the first of many we will publish at Grant Liberty, In the coming months our team will campaign for human rights wherever and however we can from the concentration camps of Uighurs to women's rights in Bangladesh.

SALADIN ALI | CEO at GRANT LIBERTY

IN BRIEF



Political prisoners in Saudi Arabia are being tortured, sexually assaulted and even murdered. Behind the expensive PR is a regime that systematically abuses prisoners of conscience by the hundred against its own rules and in violation of the international treaties it has signed.

In this report we tell the stories of the young people put to death for crimes committed at ages as young as 10; we show how simply calling for peace in a tweet can lead to the death penalty; and we list those who have died in custody in suspicious circumstances.

We detail the depths of industrial scale physical and psychological torture from the widespread use of electric shocks to beatings and even sexual abuse. We demonstrate the extensive use of prolonged solitary confinement and the repeated enforced separation of prisoners from their legal teams and families.

We show how women’s rights activists have been targeted even after the laws they campaigned to change have been amended, the waves of arrests that have seen religious leaders and journalists silenced, and the despicable targeting of the

family members of activists – even of the peaceful political campaigning for which their loved ones have angered the authorities.

But we begin with first person accounts of family members of those whose loved ones remain in prison – Lina al-Hathloul, Areej al-Sadhan, Abudllah al-Odah and Abdullah al-Ghamdi. Their stories are a stain on the conscience of the world..

Ultimately, this report proves that the murder of Jamal Khashoggi was not an aberration, it represents standard operating practice. MBS might as well stand for murder, brutality and sexual assault.

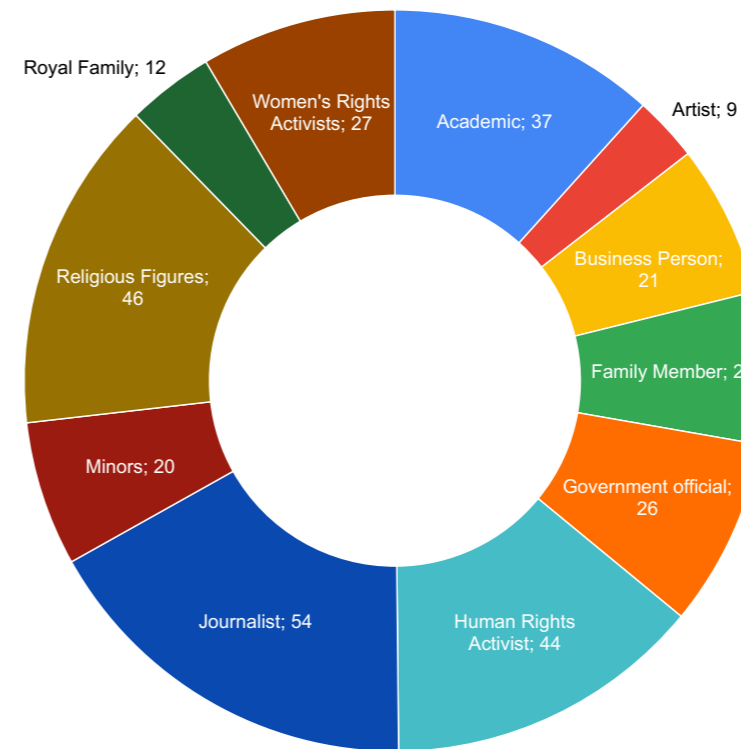
The rest of the world needs to wake up – Saudi Arabia must not be welcomed into the community of respectable nations while it tortures, abuses and murders its own people.

And the rest of the world needs to stand up – through international conferences, and global sports events the Saudi regime seeks to make others complicit in their crimes. They must refuse – and demand the release of prisoners of conscience in Saudi Arabia.

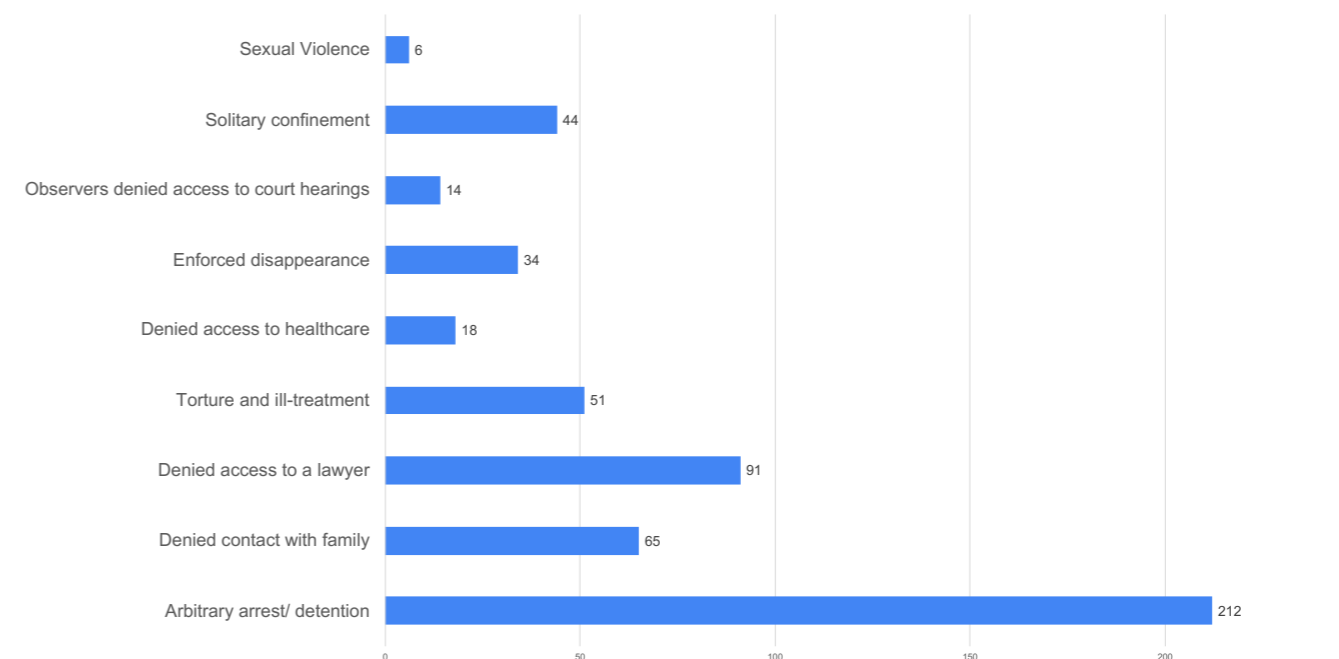
REPORT HIGHLIGHTS

309

Known prisoners of conscience we detail, arrested in the MBS-era or whose cases continue



Known Prisoners Of Conscience By Numbers



Counts Of Human Rights Violations



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report focusses on the plight of prisoners of conscience arrested in the Mohammed bin Salman era, and those whose cases continue.

The mistreatment of political prisoners in Saudi Arabia is taking place on an industrial scale, but it is important not to let the sheer extent of abuse cloud the fact that every case we document represents a personal tragedy. We cannot speak to those held in Saudi jails, so we begin with the next best thing – the stories of their loved ones.

Lina al-Hathloul discusses the case of her sister, the celebrated women’s rights activist and Nobel Prize nominee, Loujain al-Hathloul

Areej al-Sadhan, gives her perspective on her brother’s arrest and continued detention, the

humanitarian Abdulrahman al-Sadhan

Abdullah al-Odah, writes about his father, Salman al-Odah, who faces the death penalty for as little as a tweet hoping for peace with Qatar

And Abdullah al-Ghamdi discusses the cases of his mother and two brothers, arrested and tortured for no more than their association with him and his peaceful campaigning.

PART ONE: CONTEXT

In this section, we set out the context and reasoning for our focus on the MBS era. In particular we summarise the history of human rights and political prisoners in the Kingdom, and analyse the geo-political strategy behind the decisions of the MBS era – notably, the apparent contradiction between genuine reform, and the continued victimisation of activists – even those whose calls for reform have largely been granted.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was established in 1932 as an absolute Monarchy. Although its lineage of rulers formally holds absolute power, they wield that power in coordination with a range of influential interest groups, including the state’s conservative Sunni religious establishment, independent clerics, other members of the royal family, security services, and senior members of the Saudi business community.

When Mohammed bin Salman assumed office as Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, his arrival was greeted amongst Western elites with an excitement matching an understandable desire for reform within the Kingdom. That desire for reform sat within a geo-political strategy – articulated within the Vision 2030¹– which seeks to transition the Saudi economy away from its dependency on oil by diversifying the Kingdom’s domestic output into new and green technologies, amongst others.

The MBS era can properly be understood in two phases, divided by a single date – October 2 2018. In the first 16 months of the Crown Prince’s de facto rule, his actions were widely regarded as positive by the international community - even as waves of arrests intensified.

On 2 October 2018 everything changed. Journalist, thinker, campaigner and in recent years Washington Post columnist, Jamal Khashoggi was brutally murdered inside the Saudi Arabian embassy in Turkey on the express orders of Mohammed bin Salman. Jamal Khashoggi’s death is first and foremost a tragedy for his family and those who loved and respected him,



but it is also a clear answer to the question that had defined the Western elite approach to Saudi Arabia in the MBS era. Is he really a great reformer? The answer is written in his blood – no.

Today Saudi Arabia languishes at 170 out of 180 on the world press freedom index² and 149th on the Cato Institute’s Human Freedom Index³. As Human Rights Watch put it, Saudi authorities repress dissidents, human rights activists, and independent clerics.⁴

Many of the prisoners we document have not been charged, nor even informed of what they are accused. For those who have been we see a litany of trumped-up charges from spurious claims of links to terror and espionage to general sedition.

PART TWO: PRISONERS OF CONSCIENCE IN THE MBS ERA

In this section of the report we present our analysis of the current position of prisoners of conscience in Saudi Arabia. Below, we catalogue prisoners in two ways. Firstly, through human rights violations, and secondly, we categorise the prisoners into groups, from women's rights activists to journalists to those whose 'crimes' were committed as minors.

METHODOLOGY

To produce this assessment of the condition of prisoners of conscience in Saudi Arabia we have analysed available data from NGOs, government and international agencies, and conducted direct interviews with family members of a number of prisoners. We have heavily leaned on the research and publications of friends across civil society in order to bring together all available data - any mistakes are of course our own. In particular we would like to thank organisations whose work made this report possible, including:

- ALQST
- MENA Rights Group
- The Committee to Protect Journalists
- Amnesty International
- Human Rights Watch
- European Saudi Organisation for Human Rights
- Front Line Defenders
- Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain
- Gulf Centre for Human Rights
- Detainees.net

Although we have done all we can to ensure that our information is correct and up to date it must be stressed that the control the Saudi regime retains over information and free expression in the Kingdom means that the full picture is permanently obscured.

As such, the data we present is likely to be an underestimate of the full scale of the barbaric treatment of prisoners of conscience in Saudi Arabia.

WAVES OF ARRESTS

After Mohammed bin Salman became crown prince, the Saudi authorities launched a series of arrest campaigns apparently aimed at eliminating internal opposition. The arrests came in a series of distinct waves.

Wave 1

78

Potential opposition

In September 2017, three months after Muhammad bin Salman assumed the mandate of the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, the authorities launched their September purge targeting prominent Saudis, including clerics, academics, intellectuals, journalists, and human rights activists.

Wave 2

43

Arrests of "extortion"

On the evening of November 4, 2017, the Saudi Press Agency announced a royal order establishing a supreme anti-corruption committee headed by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. Later that same evening, the Saudi-owned Al-Arabiya TV began broadcasting reports of the authorities launching a massive campaign of arrests of 43 of prominent persons involved in corruption cases.

Wave 3

15

Arrests of women's rights defenders

In May 2018, a few weeks before the Saudi authorities lifted the ban on women driving on June 24, the authorities began a large coordinated campaign against the Saudi women's rights movement. The authorities arrested prominent activists in the field of women's rights and charged some of them with serious crimes that appear directly related to their activities.

Wave 4

17

April 2019 arrests

On or around April 4, 2019, and despite continued international criticism over Khashoggi's killing, Saudi Arabia carried out a new campaign of arrests, this time targeting 17 writers and activists.



HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS

In the MBS era, prisoners of conscience have been subject to a range of abusive practices, often in contravention of both international and Saudi law. These practices included:

Torture The torture of prisoners is nominally illegal in Saudi Arabia. In law, officers who are responsible for the abuse of prisoners are to be held criminally responsible, judges are prohibited from accepting confessions obtained under duress⁵, and the Saudi state is a signatory of the 1987 Convention against Torture and other cruel inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment⁶. But when it comes to prisoners of conscience, torture is endemic. We find evidence of at least 51 individuals who have suffered physical abuse at the hands of their captors.

Case study – Khaled al-Omar, thrown in jail for reporting the abuse he suffered

Sexual Violence We will never know the full extent of abuses in Saudi jails while the draconian attacks on free speech and arbitrary arrests of those the regime consider to be politically troublesome continues. Prisoners face the threat of greater abuse if they reveal their torture; family members face the danger of putting their loved ones at risk – or facing arrest themselves. As such, abuses are – by design - cloaked by the regime. Nevertheless, we know of at least 6 victims of sexual violence in Saudi jails. It is no surprise that all are women's rights activists, suggesting deliberate, targeted attacks and at the very least raising questions about complicity or even direction from senior figures.

Case study – Nouf Abdulaziz, writer and women's rights activist

Death Penalty

There are three categories of political prisoners facing the death penalty in Saudi Arabia – religious figures, a human rights activist and, incredibly, those who committed their supposed crimes as children. We have found evidence of at least five young people who have been executed in the MBS era for so-called crimes committed as children, and there are a further 13 young men facing death for 'crimes' committed as minors such as attending a funeral and sending text messages – all Shia from the Qatif region, all related to political protests in 2011/12. In addition, prosecutors are seeking the death penalty against four leading Islamic thinkers in Saudi Arabia – Ali al-Omari, Awad al-Qarni, Hassan Farhan al-Maliki and Salman al-Odah.

Case study – Muhammed Essam Al-Faraj, facing death for attending a funeral

Case study - Ali al-Omari, a scholar and media personality to be put to death on trumped up charges

Hunger Strikes

Hunger strikes are traditionally a rarity in Saudi society – not least because of cultural taboos around self-harm and suicide. In the years before MBS came to power we can find only two examples of hunger strikes in Saudi jails. In the three years since the new Crown Prince was appointed we have evidence of a marked increase in hunger strikes in Saudi jails. At least a further 12 prisoners have endured hunger strikes since MBS' appointment.

Case Study – ACPRA 7, members of the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association

Solitary Confinement

Prolonged solitary confinement is itself a form of torture. In Saudi Arabian prisons prolonged solitary confinement – over a legal limit of 15 days – is against the law. Nevertheless, we know of at least 44 prisoners to have been held in prolonged solitary confinement – many indefinitely.

Case Study – Martaja Qureiris, arrested at 13 for crimes committed at 10, he has spent more than 5% of his life in solitary

Arbitrary Detention

Saudi Arabia has a long and notorious record of holding criminal suspects without charge or trial for months and years. In May 2018, for example, Human Rights Watch found over 2,300 people under arrest for more than 6 months without seeing a judge, and almost 1,800 under arrest for over a year, 250 hadn't seen a judge three years after their arrest. Our analysis shows the picture with political prisoners is no different. 212 of the prisoners of 309 conscience we detail suffered arbitrary arrest.

Case study – Walid Fathi, never once informed of what he was accused



CATEGORIES OF PRISONER

In the years since Muhammad bin Salman assumed the mandate of the covenant in 2017, Saudi authorities have launched a series of waves of arrests targeting a range of prominent Saudi citizens, public figures, activists, government employees and even artists. We have organised these individuals into the following groups:

Women's Rights Activists

Today, there are at least 12 female women's rights activists held in Saudi prisons. They are Nouf Abdulaziz al-Jeraiwi, Loujain al-Hathloul, Mayaa al-Zahrani, Samar Badawi, Nassima al-Sadah, Israa Al-Ghamgham, Maha Al-Rafidi, Khadija al-Harbi, Fatima Al-Nassif, Aisha al-Marzooq, Naima al-Matrood and Noor Al-Muslim. A further 12 females have been arrested and held in the MBS era.

[Case study – Loujain al-Hathloul, celebrated campaigner and Nobel Prize nominee on hunger strike at time of writing](#)

Minors

The Saudi state makes no allowances for age when it comes to persecuting even the mildest critics of the regime. We have found evidence of the 20 young people arrested or held for acts committed as minors. Incredibly, since King Salman came to power his government has executed 11 people for crimes allegedly committed as children, 7 - 5 of them prisoner of conscience. In 2018, the Kingdom stated that it did not execute children, the following year it executed six children.

[Case study – Ali al-Nimr facing death after 8 years in prison for the 'crime' of attending a funeral](#)

Journalists

Jamal Khashoggi, murdered two years ago, may be the highest profile victim of Mohammed bin Salman's crackdown on journalistic freedom, but he is far from alone. We detail 54 journalists, 46 arrested in the three years since MBS took control of the Kingdom, 22 in 2019 alone, of those one is dead (and there are unconfirmed reports of a second, Turki al-Jasser, profiled below), 9 have been released, 2 are on temporary release awaiting sentencing, and the remaining 33 are in prison.

[Case study – Turki al-Jasser, not heard from since his arrest in March 2018, there are unconfirmed reports that he died from torture in November 2018](#)

Human Rights Activists

Activists have faced arbitrary arrest, torture, solitary confinement, and the denial of basic rights such as the right to see their lawyer or family members. Worse still, Abdullah al-Hamid, the former poet, professor and ACPRA member, died in prison in April 2020 following the denial of medical care. We detail 44 excluding journalists and women's rights campaigners we discuss elsewhere

[Case study – Abdulrahman al-Sadhan, the humanitarian held for almost three years, kept from his family for two.](#)

Business Leaders

In the autumn of 2017 Saudi authorities made a series of mass arrests ostensibly targeting corruption in the Kingdom. Notoriously, senior business people, government officials and members of the Saudi royal family were imprisoned inside the palatial Ritz-Carlton hotel. There are reports that up to 200 people were arrested. Human Rights Watch describes what happened next as extortion⁸.

[Case study Saleh Kamil, once a billionaire, now unclear whether and how much he paid for his release](#)

Artists

As is common amongst repressive regimes through time and around the world, poets, musicians and artists have not been safe from attacks on free speech and free expression. We know of at least 9 artists held as prisoners of conscience in the MBS era.

[Case study – Rabee Hafez, is singer songwriter who protested his friends arrest](#)

Religious Figures

On his ascent to the Crown, one of Mohammed bin Salman's first acts was to prepare for and carry out his September purge. 24 religious figures were arrested in September 2017 alone. The victims of that 'September Purge' – 78 in all – have been tortured, held in prolonged solitary confinement, denied urgent health care, and as noted above, four of the religious leaders arrested that month today face the death penalty. Just two have been permanently released.

[Case study – Salman al-Odah, facing death for advocating peace on twitter](#)

Government Officials

The powerful and influential figures arrested in November 2017 included several government officials who had fallen foul of the MBS regime. Among those arrested were the former Director of the 'anti-extortion crimes unit', former ministers and mayors, military experts, royal household officials and judges. Most of those arrested have been released without charge however eight remain in prison including Abdullah bin Sultan bin Mohammad al-Sultan, a former commander of the Royal Saudi Navy. In addition government workers are not immune from arbitrary arrest.

[Case study – Adel Fakhri, arrested for a TikTok video](#)

Academics

One of the least understood and documented categories of political prisoner in Saudi Arabia are the academics. There is an undeniable lack of free expression and free thought on Saudi campuses. The US State Department notes that academics reportedly practiced self-censorship, and authorities prohibited professors and administrators at public universities from hosting meetings at their universities with foreign academics or diplomats without prior government permission⁹. We have found evidence of 37 academics held as prisoners of conscience in the Kingdom (26 arrested in 2017 alone). Of those, 26 suffered arbitrary detention, 9 have been denied access to their families, 4 have been tortured, and 5 held in prolonged solitary confinement.

[Case study - Abdul Rahman al-Shumayri](#)

Family Members

One of the most insidious and disturbing habits of the Saudi security forces is the arrest of family members of political prisoners. They have been arrested for as little as showing support for their loved ones, or simply through association. They have been tortured, held in solitary confinement, and held without access to their families or lawyers.

We have evidence of at least 21 prisoners arrested due to their association with targets of the regime. Of those, 81% have never been charged and just three have been released.

[Case Study – the al-Ghamdis, a whole family arrested after one man's peaceful activism](#)

Royals

The Ritz-Carlton arrests of November 2017 represented a brutal assertion of political power by the then new Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. Many of those targeted were connected to his father's predecessor as King, King Abdullah. Some of those imprisoned were his sons, their arrests signifying the crushing of a rival powerbase at the top of Saudi society. Of those arrested in November 2017, at least two remain in prison. They are Prince Abdulaziz bin Salman bin Mohammad Al Saud and Prince Turki bin Abdullah.

[Case Study – Turki bin Abdullah, son of King Abdullah whose aide died during the incident](#)

Died In Custody

It is a tragic inevitability that with so many prisoners of conscience treated so badly – beaten, abused, sexually assaulted, psychologically tortured and denied medical assistance – that there will be deaths in custody or in the days immediately following the release of a prisoner. It is impossible to know how many of those whose whereabouts remain unknown are still alive. We do however know of at least four who have died in custody (or in the days after release from terminal illness brought on in prison) – they are the journalist Saleh al-Shehi, the royal aide and military leader Major General Ali al-Qahtani, the poet and ACPRA founder Abdullah al-Hamid and the former Dean of the Quran Faculty at the University of Medina Ahmad al-Ammari.



PART THREE: ACTIVISM

In the chapters above we have detailed the injustice, abuse and torment facing prisoners of conscience in Saudi Arabia under Mohammed Bin Salman. But we do not believe this is the end of the story.

The Saudi regime under MBS faces an uncertain future. As the world transitions away from fossil fuels, so in turn the Kingdom is seeking to transition its economy away from its own reliance on oil. To do this, the current regime has begun an unprecedented PR campaign. By definition, that means the Saudi regime is sensitive to its global reputation which in turn provides an unprecedented opportunity to force progressive change in the Kingdom.

EXTERNAL PRESSURE WORKS

As this report goes to press, the Saudi Ambassador to the UK has discussed the case for clemency for prisoners of conscience in the Kingdom. His words are worth printing in full.

“People ask: is it worth the damage it is causing you, whatever they did? That is a fair argument to make and it is a discussion we have back at home

within our political system and within our ministry.

“There is a variety of views. Some people say it doesn’t matter what other people think of us, what is important is to do what is right for our country, and if people knowingly break our laws they should be punished according to those laws. Other people say it isn’t worth it, let them out, let them live their lives and ignore them.”

These words should of course be taken with a pinch of salt but they do clearly suggest that there are actors within government who are sensitive to political and media pressure.

“*Repression and intimidation are not - and never should be - the acceptable companions of reform.*”¹⁰

JAMAL KHASHOGGI, SAUDI JOURNALIST AND AUTHOR (1958 - 2018)

G20 BEYOND

Given evidence that the Saudi regime is at least in part susceptible to external political and media pressure, it therefore follows that human rights activists around the world are not powerless. Instead we believe coordinated action can help free prisoners of conscience in the Kingdom.

Similarly, the popular journalist Zahra Hankir publicly refused to compère the W20 event¹¹ – the stream of the G20 process focussed on women.

In September this year, Freedom Forward led a coalition of global human rights groups including ALQST, MENA Rights Group and Action Corps in a coordinated call for city leaders to boycott the U20 event – part of the wider G20 process¹². That work, combined with media pressure, led to three major city leaders – the Mayors of New York, Los Angeles and London, announcing boycotts of the event¹³.

Outside the G20 process, like many other oppressive regimes in recent years, the Saudi public relations campaign has sought to benefit from an association with popular sport – commonly referred to as ‘sports-washing’.

In the first half of 2020, the Saudi Public Investment Fund – the regime’s sovereign wealth fund, therefore effectively controlled by the Crown Prince and his team – sought to engineer the purchase of Newcastle United Football Club, one of the best supported clubs in the richest and most popular sporting league in the world, the English Premier League. Grant Liberty, alongside other groups such as Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and Fair Square, campaigned vigorously against the sale. Ultimately, the sale fell through, not least because of a commercial dispute between the Saudi regime and the Premier League relating to broadcasting rights¹⁴, but the clear intention to use the world game to increase the Kingdom’s soft power was clear.



In a similar vein, Saudi Arabia announced its first women’s golf events – part of the Ladies European Tour, in March. The leading Brit on the tour, Meghan Maclaren withdrew from the event, stating clearly a refusal to be complicit in the regime’s attempts at sportswashing¹⁵. The events were initially delayed due to Coronavirus, however, at time of writing the Aramco Saudi Ladies International and the Saudi Ladies Team International were due to take place between the 12 and 19th of November. As part of the global campaign against Saudi sportswashing Lina al-Hathloul wrote to the leading players on the Ladies European Tour begging them to boycott the event.

At time of writing, in the coming weeks Saudi Arabia is expected to host the G20 from Riyadh. The ongoing Coronavirus will rob the regime of the sorts of pictures they will have expected when they took on the presidency of the G20. Nevertheless the event marks a seminal moment in the MBS regime. World leaders are left with a binary choice – either attend and become complicit in the human rights abuses in the Kingdom, or take a stand. The European Parliament has urged the EU to snub the summit¹⁶, and Grant Liberty is part of a global coalition of activists calling on government to boycott the event. As a minimum, governments should insist on the release of prisoners of conscience as the price for their attendance.

Nothing is set in stone.

As this report goes to press, Donald Trump – MBS’s most significant international ally – is reluctantly preparing to leave the White House. His successor – Joe Biden has talked about the Saudi regime in a completely different way – he has described the Kingdom as a pariah, pledging an end to the Trump-era ‘blank cheque’ in the face of human rights abuses.¹⁷

In this new global order, MBS’ Vision 2030 looks increasingly precarious, and as we have seen, we know actors within the regime are at least acknowledging pressure from the international community to release of prisoners of conscience.

So the lesson to activists is clear - now is the time to redouble our efforts. Saudi Arabia cannot succeed in a post-oil economy if it remains a pariah. The Kingdom’s rulers are by necessity more susceptible to political lobbying than ever before. If activists keep campaigning, if we keep showcasing the stories and the voices of the victims of this regime, if we keep lobbying our own governments and those around the world, change can come.

For MBS and the Saudi regime our message is clear - a wave of change is coming. Now is the time to do the right thing. Your economy, your national strategy and your regime will not survive growing international disgust at the abuses you inflict on your own people. Acting now is in your own interests. Free your prisoners of conscience before that wave destroys your entire government.

FAMILY TESTIMONIALS



My sister Loujain al-Hathloul ...

“

My sister is an award-winning women's rights activist, she has been nominated for the Nobel Prize and she is celebrated all around the world. Except at home in Saudi Arabia, where she languishes in a maximum-security prison.

Loujain dared to campaign for women's right to drive and an end to the outdated and outrageous male guardianship laws. She dared to attend international conferences outside of the kingdom to discuss the truth about women's rights in Saudi Arabia. She spoke out about the injustice of a system which grants men almost total superiority before the law. In 2018 she spoke at a UN conference in Geneva where she called on the Kingdom to live up to its international agreements on gender equality. Shortly after returning to the gulf, she was kidnapped. We haven't seen her since.

In prison, my sister has been tortured and degraded, and sexually abused. I fear for her life every day. As I write this my sister is on hunger strike – the second in a matter of months – in a desperate bid to force her jailers to give her access to our parents in accordance with Saudi law.



Lina al-Hathloul

Loujain is not alone. Samar Badawi, Nouf Abdulaziz and many others all remain behind bars. They too have been treated appallingly. The international community must not be complicit in these crimes. Saudi Arabia's transparent attempts to use its wealth to camouflage its severe state-sponsored human rights abuses against women cannot be allowed to succeed. Hosting major events like the G20 rewards the kingdom with its desired PR image: a powerful, modern country and global economic power, and draws international attention away from the reality of rights abuses that occur just miles away. Neither women nor world leaders should be complicit in this fiction.

As long as women inside of Saudi Arabia cannot safely speak, it is the duty of the international community to raise its voice on their behalf

”



My father Salman al-Odah ...

“

My father faces the death penalty in Saudi Arabia. His crime? He tweeted an innocuous message to his 14 million twitter followers wishing an end to the diplomatic standoff with Qatar.

Since his arrest in September 2017 he has been held in solitary confinement. Three years alone. He has been mistreated, handcuffed, blindfolded and chained inside his cell, and deprived of sleep and medications – brutalised to the point that he had to be taken to hospital. Our extended family have been banned from travelling and my uncle was arrested because he tweeted about my father. I am lucky – I am in the US – but my passport has been frozen and the Saudi authorities seek to intimidate me every chance they get.

My father is a popular and well-respected man. That is why he has been targeted. The authorities use trumped-up charges under terror laws to exert their power over activists from my father to Loujain al-Hathloul and Maysa al-Almoudi.

A year after he was taken, my father appeared in front of the notorious specialised criminal court - now a tool to hammer out any dissent or activism within the kingdom by cowering critics into silence by way of its fearsome reputation, or silencing them permanently through the death penalty. Charges are so vague – such as the “mocking” accusation against my father – that they would be laughable were the consequences not so grave.

But this is deadly serious. They want to kill my father. If they do, it will be state-sanctioned murder and they cannot be allowed to get away with it.

”



Abdullah al-Odah



My brother Abdulrahman al-Sadhan ...

“

My brother- an aid worker with the Red Crescent – has gone missing for almost 3 years. He was detained for no reason except for expressing peaceful opinions on Twitter about social justice and human rights issues.

Several witnesses have reported that my brother was subjected to severe torture, some said his injuries might kill him. Information drips out because prisoners know the punishment for speaking out about the abuse that goes on behind cell doors. My family and I have tried every possible way to find out what is going on, how he is. But we are met with a wall of silence.

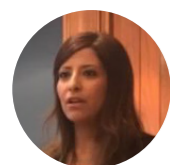
This silence from the Saudi authorities is a clear indication that they are trying to hide the abuses. We all know what has happened to others – the torture and the horrible murder of Jamal Khashoggi.

We hear stories that my brother has been forced into hunger strike due to the inhumane treatment. Since he was detained, he was denied any contact with us, except for a one-time 1-minute call 9 months ago, that came after increasing international pressure. He was never allowed to call us again. We know he is suffering. The last 2 and a half years has been a living hell.

My brother is only one of many victims suffering in silence as a result of the increasing human right abuses in the Kingdom. It is dangerous to speak out – I have been threatened, and I know these threats are not to be taken lightly – but I will not abandon my brother, nor my conscience. The international community need to demand a stop to these abuses.

I miss my brother terribly. He is a compassionate, caring man with a passion for helping others. We just want him to be released and come back safe. He doesn't deserve to be treated like this. No one does.

”



Areej al-Sadhan



My mother Aida al-Ghamdi ...

“

In 2012, I was granted asylum in Britain – I had been campaigning to put an end to the dictatorship and authoritarian policies in Saudi Arabia.

I was lucky because I got out – but it is another story for my family. My mother, Aida Al-Ghamdi and two of my brothers were arrested. No explanation has ever been provided but there is no denying the truth. They were arrested not because they had committed a crime, but because of my activism.

My mother is 64. She suffers from diabetes and high blood pressure. When she was arrested with my brother they were tortured in front of each other. They were beaten and had cigarettes put out on their skin. My brother was forced to record a video denouncing me so official Saudi channels could post it on social media. I was told that any contact with my family would endanger their lives further.

I am still forbidden from speaking to them. It is agony. I have been told that the only way they will release my mother and brothers will be if I go back to Saudi Arabia and hand myself in, but I have no way to know if this is true.

Now, I am asking the international community to show they are genuinely committed to human rights. They must demand that Saudi Arabia release my mother, brothers, and all political prisoners.

”



Abdullah al-Ghamdi

MBS ERA

PART ONE: CONTEXT

This report focusses on the plight of prisoners of conscience arrested in the Mohammed bin Salman era, and those whose cases continue. In this section, we set out the context and reasoning for that decision. In particular we summarise the history of human rights and political prisoners in the Kingdom, and analyse the geo-political strategy behind the decisions of the MBS era – notably, the apparent contradiction between genuine reform, and the continued victimisation of activists – even those whose calls for reform have largely been granted.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was established in 1932 as an absolute Monarchy. Although its lineage of rulers formally holds absolute power, they wield that power in coordination with a range of influential interest groups, including the state's conservative Sunni religious establishment, independent clerics, other members of the royal family, security services, and senior members of the Saudi business community.

The complex internal politics of the Kingdom has frequently confounded Western observers. In particular, the extent to which individual actors or groupings are quietly pursuing genuine liberal democratic reform in the face of powerful and dangerous conservative forces is a frequent – though all too often, ultimately disappointed – refrain.

What we do know, however, is that regardless of the intent of any prospective reformers, the story of human rights in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is lamentable. Free expression is non-existent, women's rights range from minuscule to non-existent, political parties are illegal.

The predictable result of these policies is a police

state in which prisoners of conscience have faced incarceration, brutality, and even murder. While it is true that in the period before MBS ascended to his position as Crown Prince the Kingdom instituted moderate reforms – the 90s saw the creation of a written constitution¹⁸, the 2000s saw the advent of voting (for men) in municipal elections¹⁹, and the 2010s saw women first join the Consultative Assembly²⁰ – the overriding essence of the state remains: one which persecutes thinkers, activists and human rights campaigners.

Under the reign of King Abdullah (2005-2015) prominent activists such as Fouad al-Farhan²¹ and Raif Badawi²² were jailed for criticising the regime. And in the first two years of the reign of King Salman – the period before MBS became Crown Prince – activists such as the human rights lawyer Waleed Abulkhair²³, journalist Alaa Brinji²⁴ and ACPRA activists Abd al-Aziz al-Shubaily and Issa al-Hamid were imprisoned for political activity²⁵.

When Mohammed bin Salman assumed office as Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, his arrival was greeted amongst Western elites with an excitement matching an understandable desire for reform within the Kingdom. That desire for reform

“*Saudi Arabia wasn't always this repressive. Now it's unbearable.*”



Jamal Khashoggi, Washington Post September 18, 2017³³

sat within a geo-political strategy – articulated within the Vision 2030²⁶ – which seeks to transition the Saudi economy away from its dependency on oil by diversifying the Kingdom's domestic output into new and green technologies, amongst others.

This plan, while building from the immense wealth created through decades of world leading oil revenues, necessitates a new approach from the Kingdom. In short, in a world beyond fossil fuels, Saudi Arabia will no longer control the production of a global necessity. Thus, the state will be left to trade on a more similar, and therefore competitive basis, with the rest of the world. It, therefore, follows that the usual tools of diplomacy – notably reputation and soft power – will become increasingly important to the state as they transition away from oil development. This is the logic of the MBS repositioning.

The MBS era can properly be understood in two phases, divided by a single date – October 2 2018. In the first 16 months of the Crown Prince's de facto rule, his actions were widely regarded as positive. A suite of reforms – in 2017 and 2018 for example, women were finally allowed the right to drive (providing they have the permission of

their guardian), and could attend sporting events, take part in sports and join the military, whilst the requirement for male permission to receive education, get healthcare, or open a business was removed²⁷ – pointed to a long-term agenda of modernisation including developing and enshrining human rights in the Kingdom. Ongoing human rights violations such as the arrest of political prisoners and persecution of religious minorities were dismissed or ignored by some in the West as vestiges of an old regime. Rome wasn't built in a day.

On 2 October 2018 that logic was exposed as wishful thinking. Journalist, thinker, campaigner and in recent years Washington Post columnist, Jamal Khashoggi was brutally murdered inside the Saudi Arabian embassy in Turkey on the express orders of Mohammed bin Salman.

Khashoggi had been a critic of MBS' crackdown on free speech and human rights – he wrote in the Washington Post of his disquiet of a band of arrests – the September purge – in which academics and writers, such as his friend Essam Al-Zamil, were detained on trumped-up charges by the regime. Three years on, they are almost

all still in prison, many have been tortured and confined to abusive solitary confinement, four face the death penalty, and 13 have not been able to contact their family since the day of their arrest. At the time of those arrests, Khashoggi wrote: “I am raising my voice. To do otherwise would betray those who languish in prison. I can speak when so many cannot. I want you to know that Saudi Arabia has not always been as it is now. We Saudis deserve better.” He was brutally murdered just over a year later.

Jamal Khashoggi’s death is first and foremost a tragedy for his family and those who loved and respected him, but it is also a clear answer to the question that had defined the Western elite approach to Saudi Arabia in the MBS era. Is he really a great reformer? The answer is written in blood – no.

Today Saudi Arabia languishes at 170 out of 180 on the world press freedom index²⁸ and 149th on the Cato Institute’s Human Freedom Index²⁹. As Human Rights Watch put it, Saudi authorities in 2019 continued to repress dissidents, human rights activists, and independent clerics³⁰. Amnesty International concludes “The authorities escalated repression of the rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly. They harassed, arbitrarily detained and prosecuted dozens of government critics, human rights defenders, including women’s rights activists, members of the Shi’a minority and family members of activists.”³¹

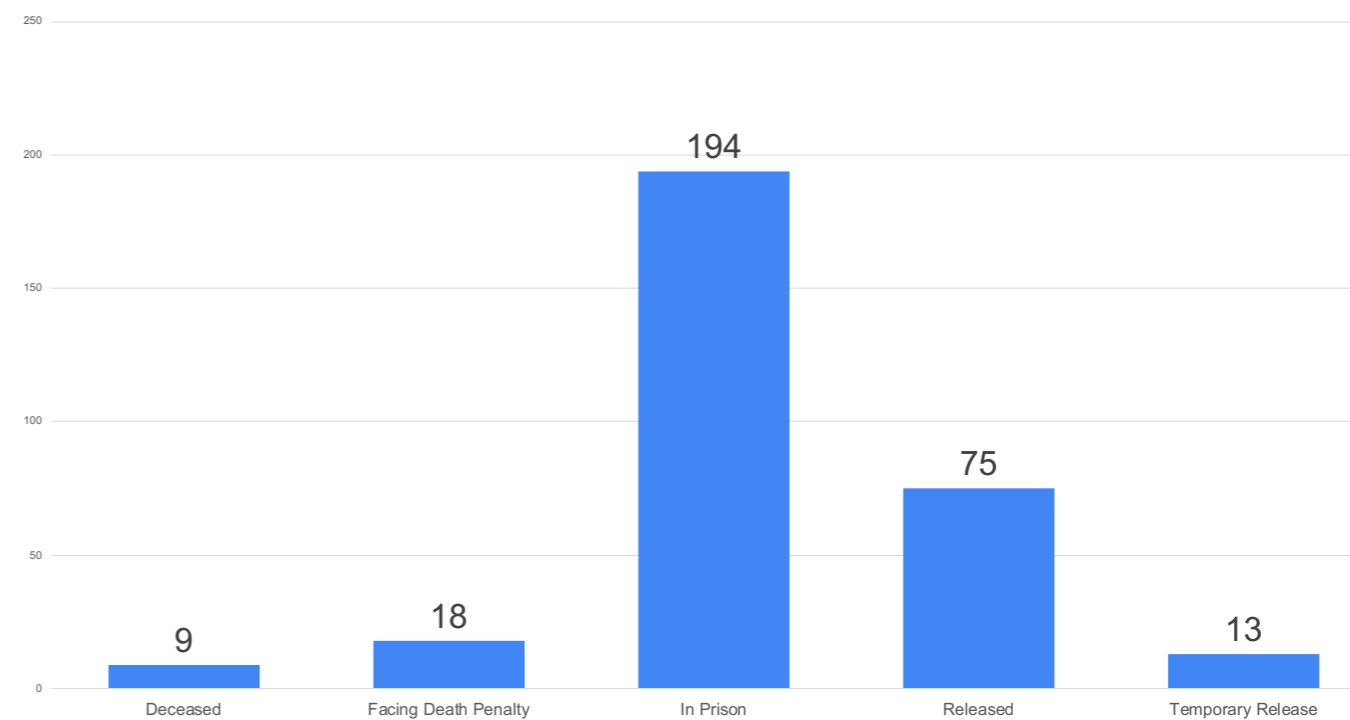
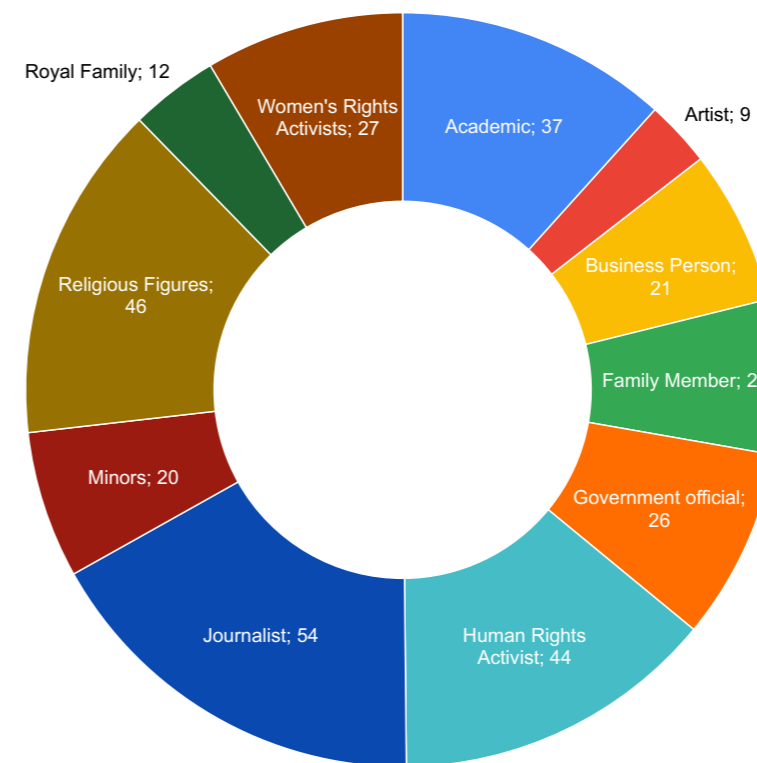
Many of the prisoners we document have not been charged, nor even informed of what they are accused. For those who have been we see a litany of trumped-up charges from spurious claims of links to terror and espionage to general sedition. As the US state department notes, “In many cases it was impossible to determine the legal basis for incarceration and whether the detention complied with international norms and standards. Those who remained imprisoned after trial, including persons who were political activists openly critical of the government, were often convicted of terrorism-related crimes. The SCC tries political and human rights activists for non-violent actions



unrelated to terrorism, violence, or espionage against the state. International NGOs, the United Nations, and others criticized the government for abusing its antiterrorism prerogative to detain or arrest some dissidents or critics of the government or royal family on security-related grounds who had not espoused or committed violence.”³²

Thus, we are left, as so often with ‘strong man’ autocratic leaders, with a dichotomy between the desired public image and the reality. However, the Crown’s strategic plan – its Vision 2030 - continues. MBS continues to court the West. We believe he is therefore open to public and media pressure – as we will set out in the concluding chapter of this report. As such, this report focusses on the crimes and brutality which has taken place under his leadership.

Influential global actors with a genuine interest in human rights could and should use the data, analysis and stories contained within this report to put pressure on the Saudi regime to deliver real change. Freeing prisoners of conscience – from women’s rights activists to journalists and campaigners for peace – should be the minimum price of entry for the Kingdom to play a full role in the global community.



Counts Of Prisoners Of Conscience By Status

PART TWO: PRISONERS OF CONSCIENCE

In this section of the report we present our analysis of the current position of known prisoners of conscience in Saudi Arabia. Below, we catalogue prisoners in two ways.

First, through the manner of their treatment, the human rights violations endured and violence they have suffered. Thus, we explain and quantify the extent of torture, sexual violence, death penalty, hunger strikes, prolonged solitary confinement, and arbitrary detention.

Second, we categorise the prisoners into groups, notably women's rights activists, minors, journalists, human rights activists, business figures, artists, religious figures, government officials, academics, family members of political figures, royals, those who have died, and those whose whereabouts is unknown. Naturally, there is a small amount of cross over between the groups, however we believe it is valuable to understand the extent to which particular categories of political prisoners are currently incarcerated.



NUMBER OF DETAINEES

309

ADULT MALES

260

ADULT FEMALES

29

MINORS

20

METHODOLOGY

To produce this assessment of the condition of prisoners of conscience in Saudi Arabia we have analysed available data from NGOs, government and international agencies, and conducted direct interviews with family members of a number of prisoners. We have heavily leaned on the research and publications of friends across civil society in order to bring together all available data - any mistakes are of course our own. In particular we would like to thank organisations whose work made this report possible, including:

- ALQST
- MENA Rights Group
- The Committee to Protect Journalists
- Amnesty International
- Human Rights Watch
- European Saudi Organisation for Human Rights
- Front Line Defenders
- Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain
- Gulf Centre for Human Rights
- Detainees.net

as well as conversations with the families of a number of prisoners and our own analysis.

We have included all prisoners arrested in the MBS-era and those whose cases continue – either because they remain in prison on political charges or because their legal ordeal continues.

Although we have done all we can to ensure that our information is correct and up to date it must be stressed that the control the Saudi regime retains over information and free expression in the Kingdom means that the full picture is permanently obscured. Those we know to have been arrested find it difficult to communicate the full extent of their treatment to the outside world – under fear of further torture or worse – and we often discover detention months after the initial arrest – as we shall see, enforced disappearance marks a central element of standard operating procedure for political prisoners.

“As such, the data we present is likely to be an underestimate of the full scale of the barbaric treatment of prisoners of conscience in Saudi Arabia. In particular, several prisoners are categorised as whereabouts unknown – frankly, we do not know if they are alive.”

Along-side this report, available on request, we have created an extensive database detailing all 309 prisoners of conscience we discuss in this report – their names, dates of birth and arrest, reasons for arrest, legal position, and any further information from ill-treatment to profession and political associations.

WAVES OF ARRESTS

After Mohammed bin Salman became crown prince, the Saudi authorities launched a series of arrest campaigns apparently aimed at eliminating internal opposition. The arrests came in a series of distinct waves.

Wave 1

78

Potential opposition

In September 2017, three months after Muhammad bin Salman assumed the mandate of the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, the authorities launched their September purge targeting prominent Saudis, including clerics, academics, intellectuals, journalists, and human rights activists.

Wave 2

43

Arrests of “extortion”

On the evening of November 4, 2017, the Saudi Press Agency announced a royal order establishing a supreme anti-corruption committee headed by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. Later that same evening, the Saudi-owned Al-Arabiya TV began broadcasting reports of the authorities launching a massive campaign of arrests of 43 of prominent persons involved in corruption cases.

Wave 3

15

Arrests of women’s rights defenders

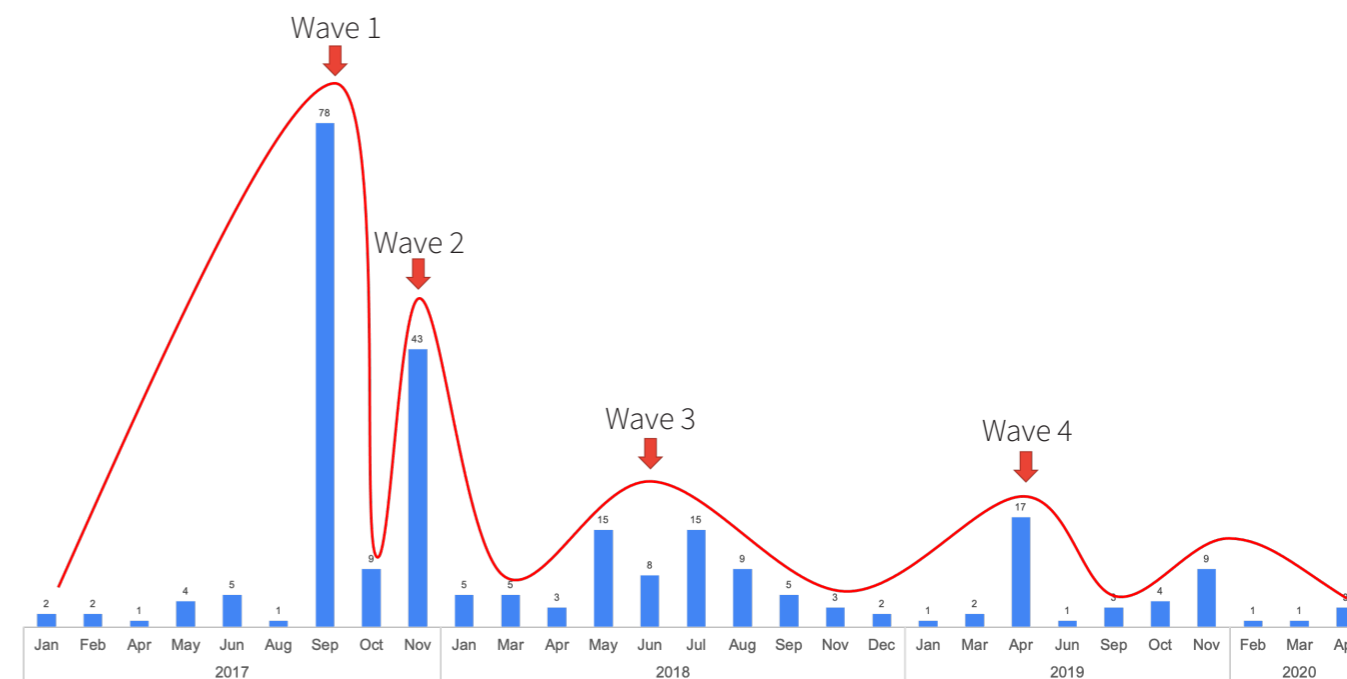
In May 2018, a few weeks before the Saudi authorities lifted the ban on women driving on June 24, the authorities began a large coordinated campaign against the Saudi women’s rights movement. The authorities arrested prominent activists in the field of women’s rights and charged some of them with serious crimes that appear directly related to their activities.

Wave 4

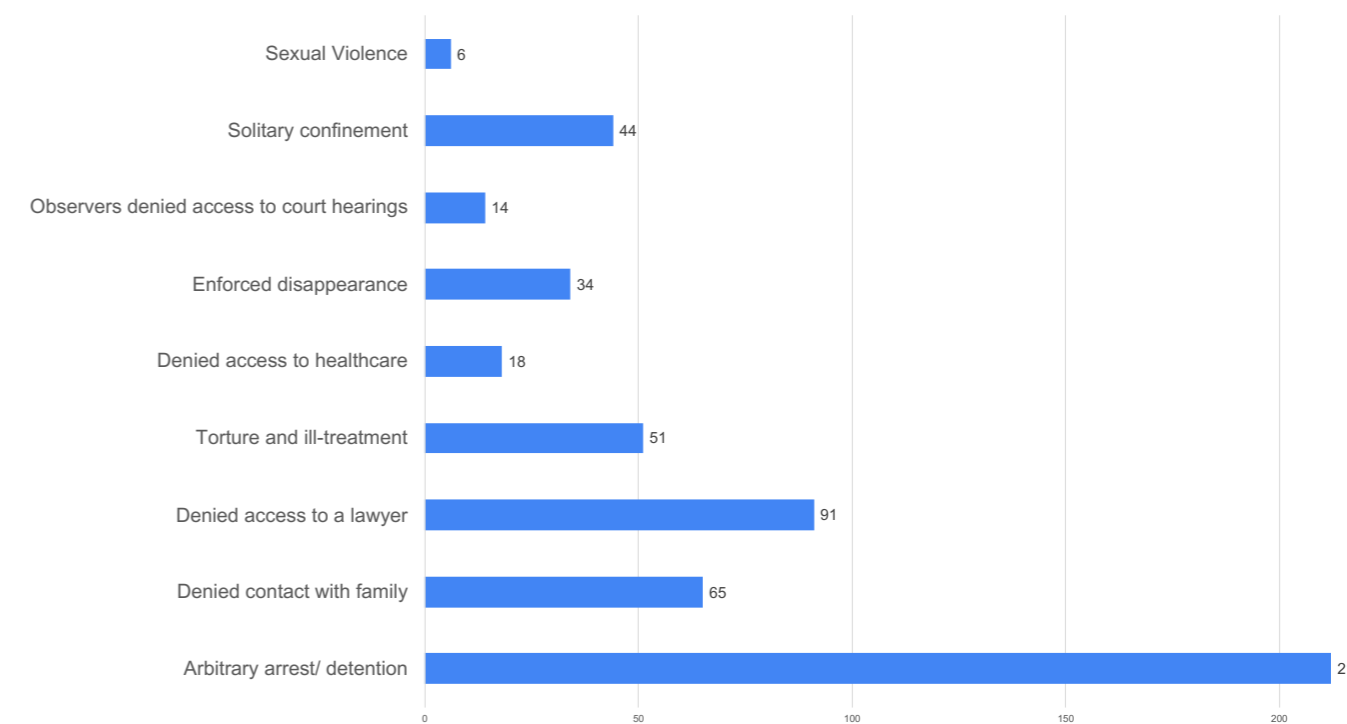
17

April 2019 arrests

On or around April 4, 2019, and despite continued international criticism over Khashoggi’s killing, Saudi Arabia carried out a new campaign of arrests, this time targeting 17 writers and activists.



Waves Of Arrests In The MBS Era



Counts Of Human Rights Violations

HUMAN RIGHT VIOLATIONS

Torture

“
We have seen this happen before, but not at this kind of scale. It’s the most oppressive era we have witnessed.³⁷

HALA AL-DOSARI, SAUDI SCHOLAR AND ACTIVIST, JUNE 2019”

NUMBER OF CASES

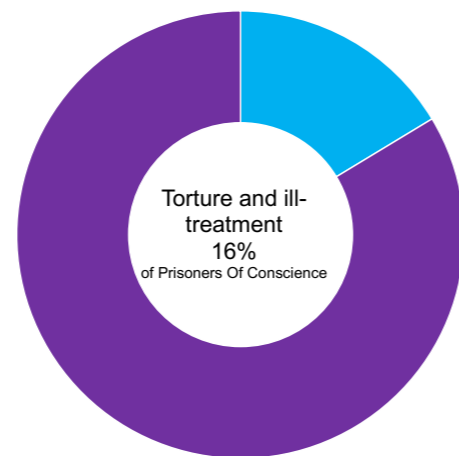
51

The torture of prisoners is nominally illegal in Saudi Arabia. In law, officers who are responsible for the abuse of prisoners are to be held criminally responsible, judges are prohibited from accepting confessions obtained under duress,³⁴ and the Saudi state is a signatory of the 1987 Convention against Torture and other cruel inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment³⁵.

But when it comes to prisoners of conscience, torture is endemic. We find evidence of at least 51 individuals who have suffered physical abuse at the hands of their captors.

The abuses we document start from first contact with the authorities and in the worst cases ends in death. The forms of torture we found include severe beatings and flogging; cigarette burns; electric shocks; hanging by hands and feet; beating on the soles of the feet; sleep deprivation; injection with paralyzing substances; being handcuffed and blindfolded while in prison; the use of prolonged solitary confinement and sexual abuse as documented in sections below.

We have seen widespread accounts of forced confessions under torture and threats to both the individual victim and their family members. This has been a particularly common occurrence in the cases of minors.



The abuse of political prisoners is unquestionably known to Saudi leaders including MBS. A March 2019 Guardian investigation revealed leaked reports to the Saudi leadership documenting health professionals’ analysis of the condition of a range of prisoners.

The newspaper published a number of comments in full, comments reproduced overleaf.

In 2019 the US state department noted evidence of at least 17 detainees hospitalized for physical abuse, and one later died in custody with his body bearing signs of torture.³⁶

The cases of torture we find include members of a range of organisations including ACPRA (The Saudi Civil and Political Rights association), the Saudi Liberal Forum, and Al Adalah centre for Human Rights. Of the 51 we document, 12 were women, 13 were arrested for crimes committed as children, 3 were arrested because of the activities of family members and 7 were journalists.

“The patient suffers from severe weight loss with continuous bloody vomiting. There are also a number of wounds and bruises scattered in several areas of the body”

“There are also a number of visible injuries in the chest and lower back”

“The patient has difficulty walking because of a number of bruises visible on the legs area. A number of injuries are also visible on the forearm and lower back area. Malnutrition and obvious dryness on the skin”

“The patient suffers from a number of bruises visible on the body, especially in the areas of back, abdomen and thighs. It also appears to be malnourished due to lack of eating and facial pallor and general weakness in the body”

“The patient cannot move at all due to wounds in both legs as well as severe weakness in the body due to malnutrition and lack of fluids”

“The patient suffers from severe burns throughout the body. Old wounds were not completely healed because of medical negligence”

“The patient suffers from difficulty in movement due to severe malnutrition and general lack of fluids. There are also a number of bruises, wounds and sores throughout the body”

Quotations taken from report to Saudi leadership leaked to the Guardian, March 2019



Case study: Khaled al-Omair

In July 2018, human rights activist, Khaled al-Omair was arrested by State Security a little over a year after the delayed completion of his eight-year sentence on charges of political activity.

Al-Omair had filed a complaint against an officer who had tortured him in prison - he has been handcuffed, placed in prolonged solitary and forced to stand until he passed out. The authorities’ response was at once shocking and predictable – he was arrested. On returning to prison he was forced into a hunger strike following six months enforced disappearance, in protest at the authorities’ plans to try him in front of criminal court specialising in terrorism charges. He remains in prison awaiting trial. In a note smuggled out of his prison he wrote, “I am not a terrorist, I have an opinion and exercised my right to freedom of expression.”

Sexual Violence

“
Rape and other forms of sexual assault in detention are a particularly despicable violation of the inherent dignity and right to physical integrity of every human being; and accordingly constitute an act of torture.³⁸

– UNITED NATIONS SPECIAL RAPPORTEUR ON TORTURE

NUMBER OF CASES

6

We will never know the full extent of abuses in Saudi jails while the draconian attacks on free speech and arbitrary arrests of those the regime consider to be politically troublesome continues. Prisoners face the threat of greater abuse if they reveal their torture; family members face the danger of putting their loved ones at risk – or facing arrest themselves. As such, abuses are – by design - cloaked by the regime.

That is doubly true for sexual abuse. The stakes are higher to match the revulsion of the international community at those who would commit such acts, and cultural taboos facing victims of sexual violence – around the world, but particularly in Saudi Arabia – create further barriers to prisoners who have been abused.

Nevertheless, we know of at least 6 victims of sexual violence in Saudi jails. It is of no surprise that all are women’s rights activists, suggesting deliberate, targeted attacks and at the very least raising questions about complicity or even direction from senior figures.



All 6 victims subject to sexual abuse are women’s rights activists raising serious questions about deliberate targeting

Those six are: Eman al-Nafjan, Nouf Abdulaziz al Jeraiwi, Loujain al-Hathloul, Mayaa al-Zahrani, Samar Badawi and Maysa al-Mana, all arrested in the wave of women’s rights activists incarcerated in the spring and summer of 2018.



Loujain Al-Hathloul was one of five Arabs featured on Time Magazine’s 100 most influential people list⁴⁰



Samar Badawi received the International Women of Courage Award from U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton and First Lady Michelle Obama in 2012.



Case study: Nouf Abdulaziz

Nouf wrote extensively about women’s rights in Saudi Arabia, both in her personal blog and in frequent newspaper columns.

Since her arrest she has suffered a range of human rights violations including prolonged enforced disappearance and solitary confinement, there are reports that she has been tortured – including beaten with a heavy cord – and sexually assaulted.

On March 14, 2019, the US free expression organisation PEN awarded Nouf Abdulaziz, alongside fellow imprisoned Saudi activists, Loujain Al-Hathloul, and Eman Al-Nafjan the 2019 PEN America/Barbey Freedom to Write Award.³⁹

Today, she remains in prison, still awaiting a fair trial.

Death Penalty

NUMBER OF CASES

18

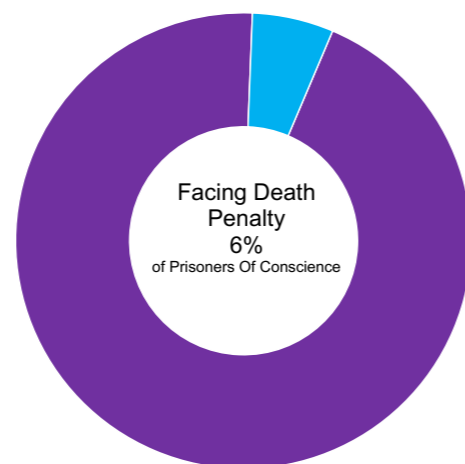
There are three categories of political prisoners facing the death penalty in Saudi Arabia – religious figures, a human rights activist and, incredibly, those who committed their supposed crimes as children.

Indeed, we have found evidence of at least five young people who have been executed in the MBS era for so-called crimes committed as children. They are Abdulkareem al-Hawaj, Mojtaba al-Suwaiket, Munir al-Adam, Saeed Mohammed al-Skafi and Salman al Qurraish. who were all put to death together alongside 34 other men in a gruesome spectacle in April 2019 after being convicted of offenses related to the attending of protests during the Arab Spring uprisings in Qatif.

There are a further 13 young men facing death for crimes committed as minors such as attending a funeral and sending text messages – all Shia from the Qatif region, all related to political protests in 2011/12.

In addition, prosecutors are seeking the death penalty against four leading Islamic thinkers in Saudi Arabia – Ali al-Omari, Awad al-Qarni, Hassan Farhan al-Maliki and Salman al-Odah.

Each was arrested in MBS' September Purge of 2017, which saw the arrest of more than 60 political prisoners – most of whom were leading clerics – in a single month. Their arrests span just three days from the 9th – 11th of September. Following their arrests, a group of UN human rights experts deplored what they said was “a worrying pattern of widespread and systematic arbitrary

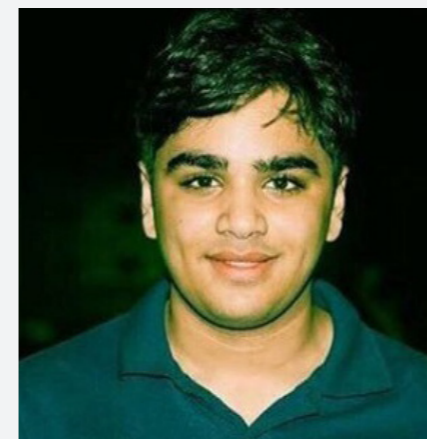


arrests and detention”. All have been denied proper access to a lawyer and a fair an open trial, and at least three of them have been tortured.

Unquestionably the death penalty is the ultimate sanction. Yet, the incidents for which these four men are to be tried and potentially murdered by the state range from the minor to almost flippant.

Salman al-Odah is believed to be facing the death penalty for refusing to send a tweet in support of the leadership’s position on Qatar⁴¹. Ali al-Omair faces death simply for calling for demonstrations⁴². Awad al-Qarni risks losing his life, for amongst other things ‘showing sympathy for other detainees⁴³. Hassan Farhan al-Maliki faces the death penalty for his pronouncements on Islam and giving interviews to foreign journalists⁴⁴.

Following discussions with those close to some of these prisoners, Grant Liberty can report wide-spread suspicions that the trials are being conducted under direction from the very top of the Saudi state, and are seen by the regime as an opportunity for the new crown prince to face down some of the most popular religious figures in the Kingdom.



Case study: Muhammad Essam Al-Faraj

Muhammad Essam Al-Faraj faces the death penalty, almost unbelievably, for attending a funeral. He was nine years old at the time.

The German human rights charity ESOHR reports that he, alongside other young men facing the death penalty for similar crimes has suffered ‘horrific conditions, including long-term detention before their presentation to the court, solitary confinement, denial of access to a lawyer, torture, and other degrading and inhumane treatment.’⁴⁷



Case study: Ali al-Omari

Ali al-Omari is one of the most popular Islamic personalities in the Arab world – thanks in part to his own Youth Awareness channel.

He is the chairman of TV channel 4Shbab and a talk-show personality. His television programmes have called for more rights for women, and campaigned against violent extremism⁴⁵.

He faces at least 30 terrorism-related charges, including “forming a terrorist youth organization,” and a potential death sentence. In prison he has been tortured, held in solitary confinement and denied access to a fair and open trial – there are reports that he has suffered burns and injuries all over his body as a result of electric shocks during solitary confinement for more than a year.⁴⁶

Hunger Strikes

NUMBER OF CASES

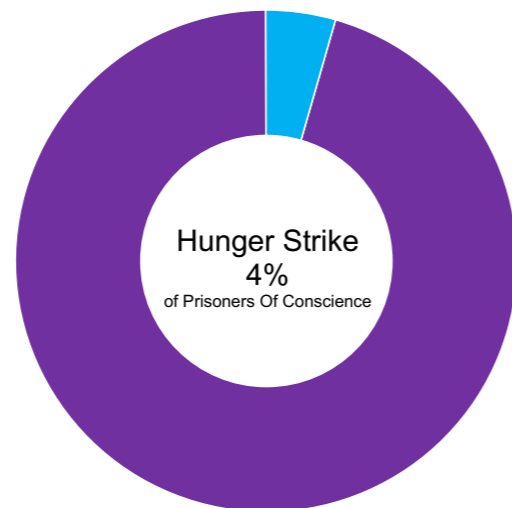
14

Hunger strikes are traditionally a rarity in Saudi society – not least because of cultural taboos around self-harm and suicide. In the years before MBS came to power we can find only two examples of hunger strikes in Saudi jails.

The first is Saud al-Hashimi. He one of the longest jail sentence of any prisoner of conscience in Saudi Arabia – 30 years and a 30-year ban on traveling. He has been subjected to physical torture to coerce him into breaking his hunger strike.

The second is Mohammed al-Bajadi, who endured 3 hunger strikes in 2012. It is widely believed that he was released because of international support for his hunger strikes and NGO / Media pressure on the Saudi Authorities. He was force fed during his hunger strike.

However, in the three years since the new Crown Prince was appointed we have evidence of a marked increase in hunger strikes in Saudi jails. At least a further 12 prisoners have endured hunger strikes since MBS' appointment. They include Loujain al-Hathloul, who began a hunger strike in August 2020 in order to force a meeting with her family, and is currently on hunger strike at time of writing (October 2020). The humanitarian,



Abdulrahman al-Sadhan, was forced into a hunger strike in the summer of 2020, Salman al-Odah the cleric and activist, and at least 7 members of ACPRA the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association.

The prisoners have been pushed into hunger strikes in order to protest a range of abuses including torture, enforced isolation from families and lawyers, arbitrary arrest, and various further human rights violations. Although some have won limited changes to their condition, such as meetings with family members, the response of the authorities has typically been further abuse, including prolonged solitary confinement and forced feeding.



Case study: The ACPRA 7

The Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association was formed in 2009 in response to deteriorating human rights in the Kingdom – though its legitimacy and legality have never been accepted by the monarchy.

The group of activists and academics has campaigned for democratic reforms and laws to protect minority rights. In February 2018, 5 ACPRA members took part in a coordinated hunger strike in protest at their treatment in prison - Abdulkarim al-Khodr, Abdullah al-Hamid, Abdulrahman al-Hamid, Fawzan al-Harbi and Mohammed Fahad al-Qahtani. The authorities' response was to place all five in solitary confinement. All remain in prison.



Abdulkarim al-Khodr



Abdullah al-Hamid



Abdulrahman al-Hamid



Fawzan al-Harbi



Mohammed Fahad al-Qahtani



Abdul aziz al-Shubaily



Essa al-Hamid

Solitary Confinement

NUMBER OF CASES

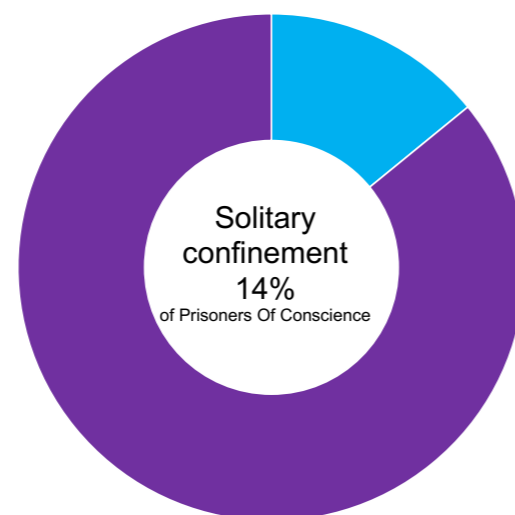
44

Prolonged solitary confinement is in itself a form of torture. In Saudi Arabian prisons prolonged solitary confinement – over a legal limit of 15 days – is against the law. Nevertheless, we know of at least 44 prisoners to have been held in prolonged solitary confinement – many indefinitely.

In Saudi prisons solitary confinement typically means sitting alone for 22 hours a day or more. Inevitably those held in prolonged solitary confinement are often held incommunicado and are therefore one of the hardest for family members, NGOs and lawyers to get to, however reports have emerged of activists held in solitary confinement for over a year.

Often combined with physical torture in Saudi prisons – frequently resulting in prisoners requiring medical assistance⁴⁸ – solitary confinement is widely accepted to have a profound impact on a victim's health.

Physiological effects include symptoms similar to those of hypertension, such as chronic headaches, trembling, sweaty palms, extreme dizziness and heart palpitations, as well as digestive problems and a lack of appetite.⁴⁹



Psychological effects can include psychosis and depression, with a risk of leading to self-harm and even suicide, as well as a long-term degradation of cognitive ability and wider feelings of extreme mental duress.



Case study: Murtaja Qureiris

Murtaja Qureiris was arrested as a 13-year-old for crimes he allegedly committed as a 10-year-old.

His crime was to lead 30 other children in a rudimentary protest march for human rights during the Arab Spring in 2011. He is believed to have spent a year and three months of his time in jail in solitary confinement, more than 5% of his life - he remains under 20 years old.⁵⁰



Arbitrary Detention

NUMBER OF CASES

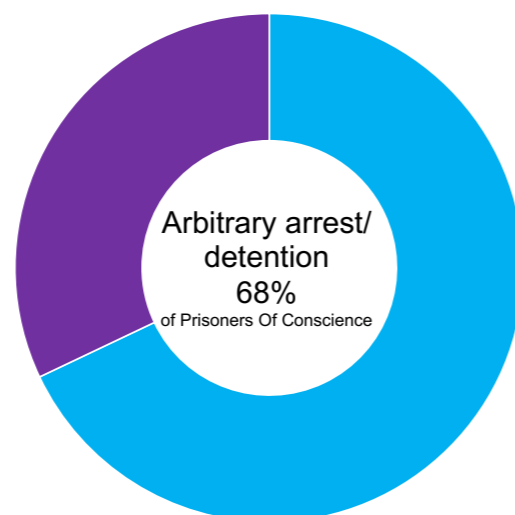
212

Saudi Arabia has a long and notorious record of holding criminal suspects without charge or trial for months and years. In May 2018, for example, Human Rights Watch analysed information from an online database on prisoners released by the Saudi Ministry of Interior.

They found over 2,300 people under arrest for more than 6 months without seeing a judge, and almost 1,800 under arrest for over a year, 250 hadn't seen in a judge three years after their arrest⁵¹. A visual representation of the analysis of the number of prisoners being held without charge at the time of the report are shown in the graph overleaf.

Our analysis shows the picture with political prisoners is no different. 212 of the prisoners of 309 conscience we detail suffered arbitrary arrest. The Saudi Law of Criminal Procedure stipulates that individuals can be detained without charge for a maximum of 5 days, and detention is renewed for a maximum of 6 months upon orders from the Bureau of Investigation and Prosecution (currently the Public Prosecution Office). According to the aforementioned system, "Immediately after that, [the detainee] must be transferred to the competent court or released."

The UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention has found that detention is considered arbitrary when authorities fail to observe standards relating to the right to due process - in whole or in part - including



the right to be brought promptly before a judge after an arrest. Principle 11 of the "UN Body of Principles for the Protection of All Persons under Any Form of Detention or Imprisonment" states that the detainee shall have "a real opportunity to make his statement as soon as possible before a judicial or other authority" and that it must be in a judicial or other authority.

Prisoners of conscience in Saudi Arabia have been arrested and forcibly rendered from foreign countries, they have been held and extorted in palatial hotels and they have been brutally captured and abused in front of the children. Very few have been given a clear legal basis for their arrest within reasonable timeframes and fewer still have had a reasonable chance to defend themselves in a court of law.

“

If Saudi authorities can hold a detainee for months on end with no charges, it's clear that the Saudi criminal justice system remains broken and unjust, and it only seems to be getting worse.⁵²

SARAH LEAH WHITSON, MIDDLE EAST DIRECTOR AT HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH ”

”

Under investigation for **more than 6 months**, without referring them to a judge



PRISONERS
2,305

Under investigation for **more than a year**, without referring them to a judge



PRISONERS
1,875

Under investigation for **more than 3 years**, without referring them to a judge



PRISONERS
251



Case study: Walid Fathi

The Saudi-American doctor Walid Fathi was arrested in the November 2017 Ritz Carlton affair.

He was detained for more than 20 months without charge. In that time he was extensively tortured – electrocuted and whipped – and denied family visits and phone calls. For long periods he was blindfolded and handcuffed inside the prison. To this date, he still has no information about the crimes he was accused of.

CATEGORIES OF PRISONER

Women's Rights Activists

NUMBER OF CASES

27

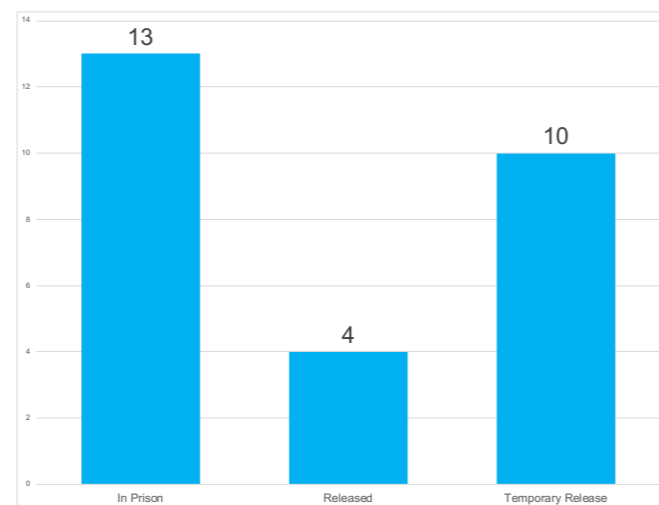
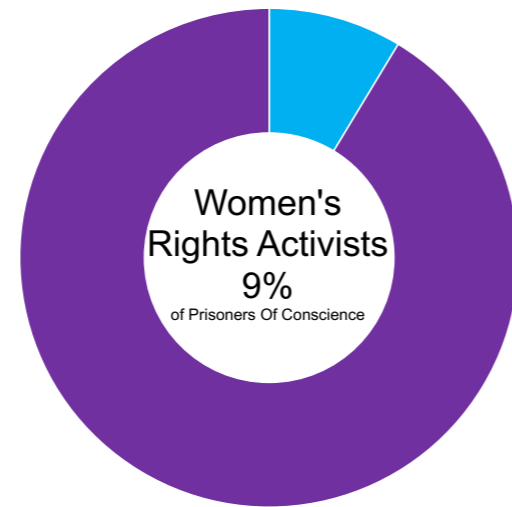
Today, there are at least 12 female women's rights activists held in Saudi prisons. They are Nouf Abdulaziz al-Jeraiwi, Loujain al-Hathloul, Mayaa al-Zahrani, Samar Badawi, Nassima al-Sadah, Israa Al-Ghamgham, Maha Al-Rafidi, Khadija al-Harbi, Fatima Al-Nassif, Aisha al-Marzooq, Naima al-Matrood and Noor Al-Muslim. A further 12 females have been arrested and held in the MBS era.

Included in those we document are 3 male women's rights activists, one has been released, one has been temporarily released, and one remains in prison.

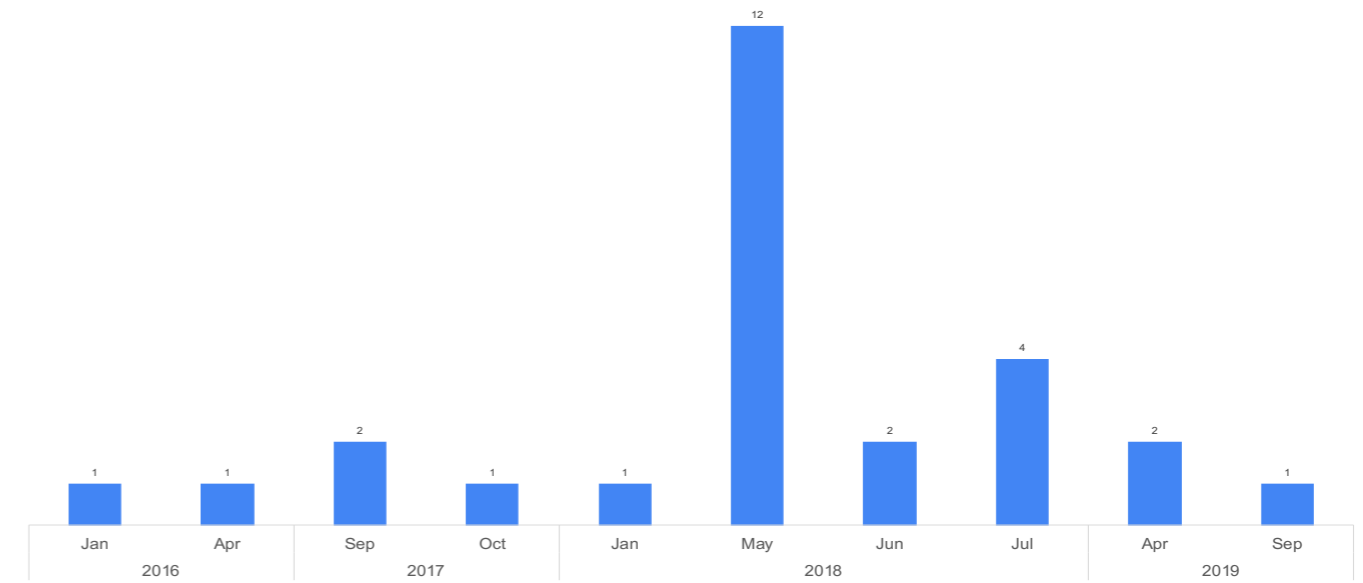
By far the majority of arrests, 19 were made in 2018, largely in two tranches. First in May 2018, 12 activists were arrested and in July a second series of arrests took place. Those imprisoned have typically campaigned for an end to the male guardianship law and women's right to drive.

Despite reforms – including the granting of women's right to drive in September 2017 – campaigners have not been released. Those who remain in prison without trial have typically seen their treatment deteriorate over time. A series of trials expected in March 2020 – almost two full years after the May 2018 arrests – has been delayed indefinitely, with the Saudi authorities citing the Coronavirus crisis.

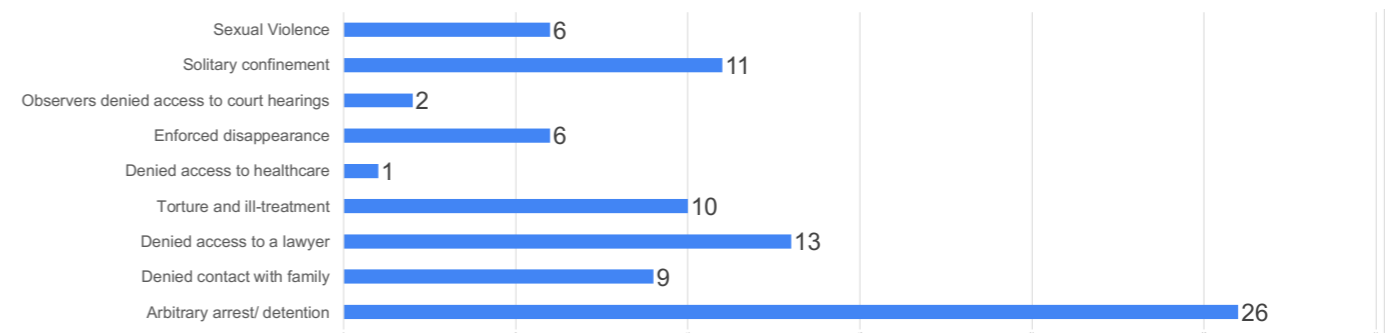
Of those we document, 10 have been tortured, 6 have been sexually assaulted, half have been denied access to a lawyer.



Of the 27 women's activists arrested, 13 remain in prison, 10 are temporarily released on bail, and only 4 have been freed.



Women's Rights Activists Arrests By Date



Counts Of Human Rights Violations

Women's Rights Activists



Case study: Loujain al-Hathloul

Loujain al-Hathloul is a celebrated human rights activist and former Nobel Prize nominee. She is primarily known for her iconic campaign for the right to drive. Loujain was arrested alongside other activists in May 2018.

Along with several prominent Saudi women's human rights defenders and activists, Loujain was arrested in May 2018.

Since her arrest in March 2018, Loujain has been subjected to threats of sexual assault, torture, prolonged solitary confinement and enforced disappearance, and was recently forced into a hunger strike to secure access to her family, after being subjected to enforced disappearance. At time of writing (November 4 2020) Loujain is on hunger strike in protest at the authorities' refusal to allow her legally mandated regular contact with her family (who are acting as her legal counsel).

Minors

“

Executions are the latest act in the Saudi Arabian authorities' ongoing persecution of the Shi'a minority. The death penalty is being deployed as a political weapon to punish them for daring to protest against their treatment and to cow others into silence⁶⁰

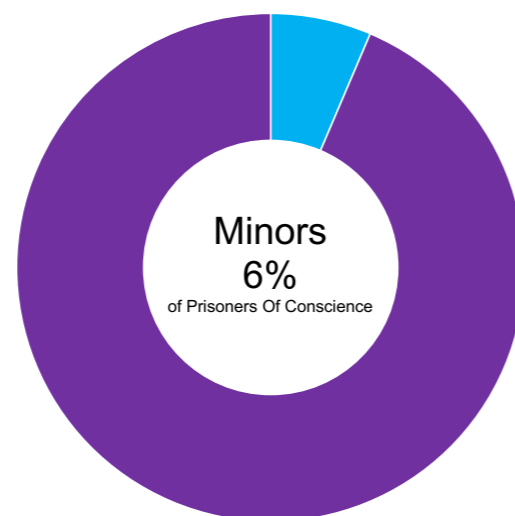
Lynn Maalouf, Director for Research at Amnesty International's Beirut office.”

NUMBER OF CASES

20

The Saudi state makes no allowances for age when it comes to persecuting even the mildest critics of the regime. We have found evidence of 20 young people arrested or held for acts committed as minors. Incredibly, since King Salman came to power his government has executed 11 people for crimes allegedly committed as children⁵³. In 2018, the Kingdom stated that it did not execute children, the following year it executed six children⁵⁴. They included Abdulkarim al-Hawaj who was beheaded because he sent Whatsapp messages about a protest when he was 16.

Mojtaba al-Suwaiket was 17 years old when he was arrested at King Salman airport minutes before a planed flight to the US to study at Michigan University. Instead, he was held, forced into a confession under torture and eventually beheaded in 2019 for the crime of attending pro-democracy protests⁵⁵.



Munir al-Adam, also a teenager when he was arrested, was executed alongside Abdulkarim al-Hawaj, Mojtaba al-Suwaiket, after being held, beaten and refused legal counsel. He was beaten so badly he became deaf in one ear⁵⁶. In total 37 men were executed in a single barbaric spectacle

We have seen further reports that at least two further young men – minors at the time of their supposed crimes – have been executed under MBS for political crimes, Saeed Mohammed al-Skafi and Salman al-Qurraish.⁵⁷

A further 13 have been sentenced to death. They include Dawoud Hussain al-Marhoon who was arrested after refusing to inform on attendees at a political protest. He was convicted following a confession induced by torture⁵⁸.

Others have been sentenced to up to 44 years for crimes committed as children.

The 20 prisoners we detail have been arrested and charged with alleged crimes committed while they were minors, some as young as 9 years old, and some for crimes as absurd as attending a friend's funeral. Murtaja Qureiris was arrested for sowing sedition – at the age of ten years old.

More than half of those we detailed have been tortured, 17 suffered arbitrary arrest and at least 8 have endured prolonged solitary confinement. Many have been held years without charge - Ahmad Al Hossan was held for eleven years before his trial began⁵⁹. Those who have faced trial have

all been tried in secret, and in many cases, even the prisoners themselves were not permitted to be present.

The minors we detail are exclusively from the country's Shia minority in the Qatif region. In 2011/12 at the time of the Arab Spring, an uprising in the region saw hundreds protest on the streets against anti-shia discrimination. Human Rights Watch, amongst others, have noted the persistence of anti-Shia prejudice and practices in the Kingdom, from hateful content in school books to bans on public expression and of course the arrest – and execution - of political prisoners.

In April 2020 Saudi Arabia announced that it would no longer use the death penalty for those convicted of crimes committed as minors. However, as noted above, the Kingdom has made demonstrably false assertions as the killing of children. As such, until the prisoners we discuss above are released, we believe the Saudi authorities have not earned the right to be judged on their promises to the international community.



Case study: Ali al-Nimr

Ali al-Nimr has been held for eight and a half years following his arrest for attending a protest at the age of seventeen. For that crime, the Saudi authorities have sentenced him to death.

Al-Nimr was arrested following the deliberate ramming of his motorcycle by a police car, which resulted in his hospitalisation and multiple broken bones. He has been repeatedly tortured whilst in prison following his conviction for, in the words of court documents 'encouraging pro-democracy protests using a BlackBerry smartphone'. The trial itself has been described as 'deeply flawed' by Amnesty International.

His death penalty, along with those of fellow Shia activists, Abdullah al-Zaher and Dawood al-Marhoun, all arrested for crimes committed as minors, is under review.⁶¹

Journalists

NUMBER OF CASES

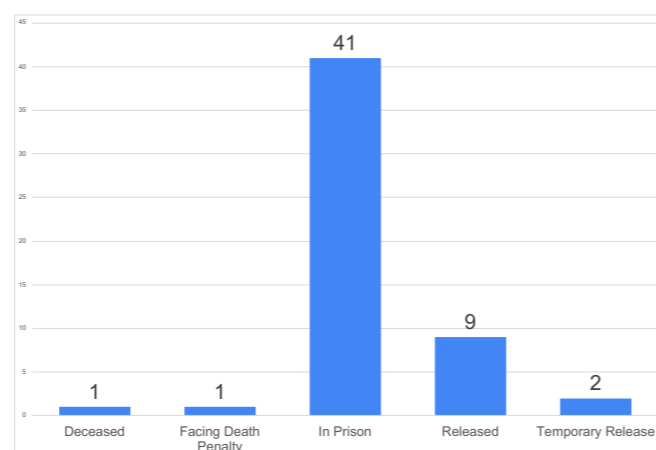
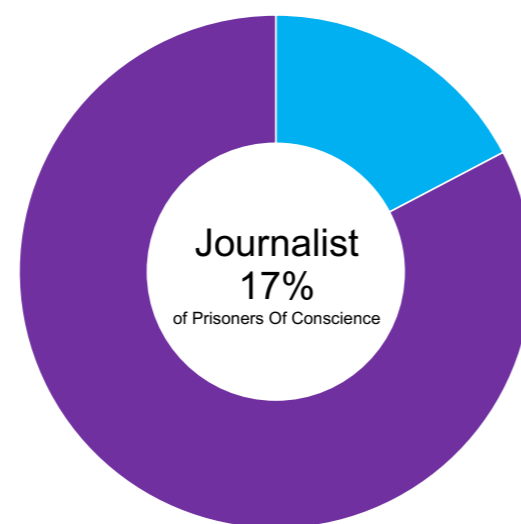
54

Jamal Khashoggi, murdered two years ago, may be the highest profile victim of Mohammed bin Salman's crackdown on journalistic freedom, but he is far from alone. We detail 54 journalists, 46 arrested in the three years since MBS took control of the Kingdom, 22 in 2019 alone, of those one is dead (and there are unconfirmed reports of a second, Turki al-Jasser, profiled below), 9 have been released, 2 are on temporary release awaiting sentencing, and the remaining 33 are in prison.

Saudi Arabia, which is ranked 172 out of 180 on the world press freedom index, has continued to arrest journalists this year. Although information emerges slowly from the Kingdom we know of at least one in 2020 - Aqel al-Bahili – as recently as April. The arrested journalists have typically written about politics, human rights or corruption and lean heavily on social media to engage with the public. Few were high profile at the time of their arrest – they were ordinary working journalists arrested under a wider crackdown on free speech.

In common with other prisoners of conscience in Saudi Arabia, journalists have suffered horrific abuse in prison. 7 have been tortured, 8 have suffered prolonged solitary confinement. The victims of this abuse include:

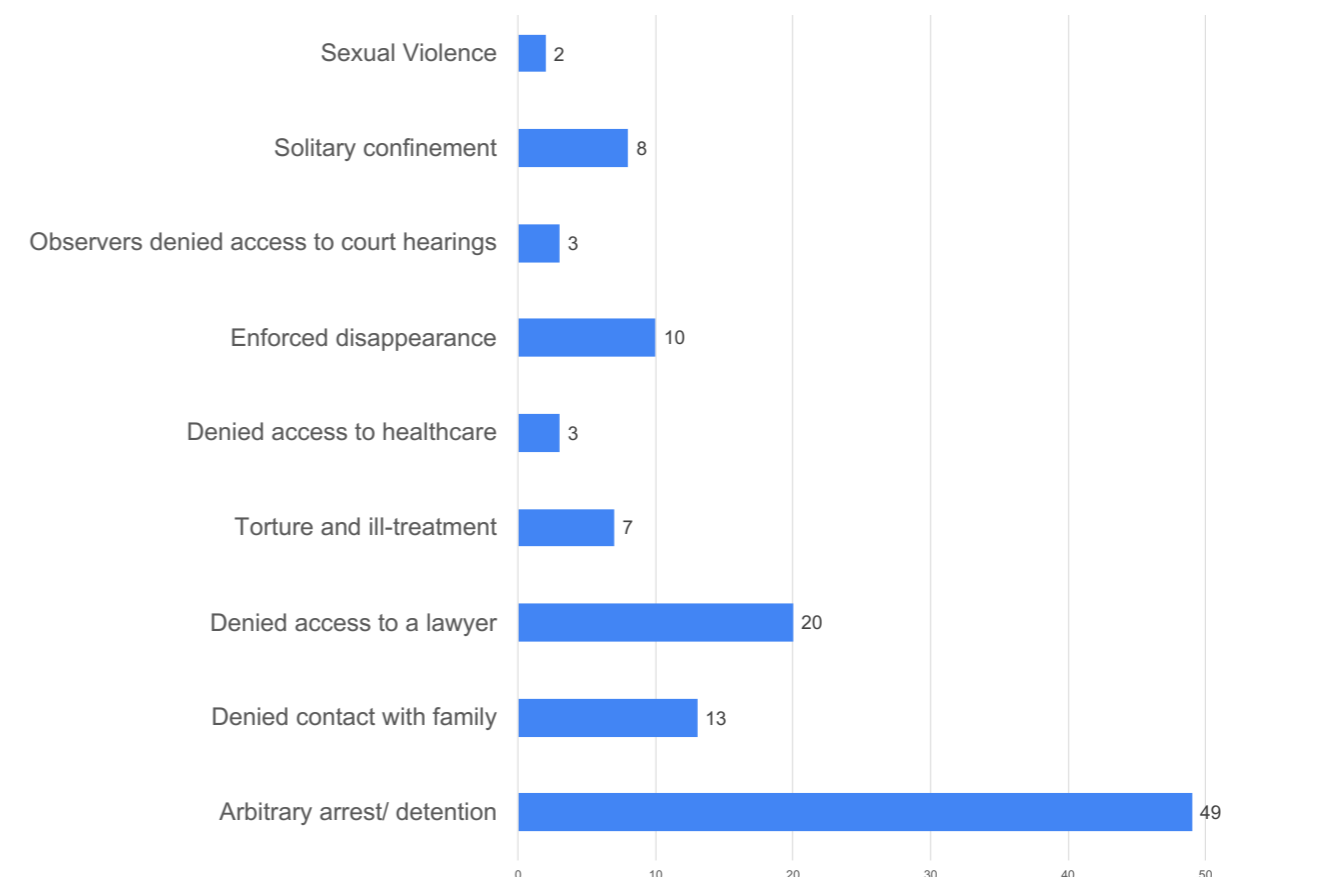
- Saleh al-Shehi a close ally of Jamal Kashoggi, who died on July 19 2020 immediately after his release. He is believed to have contracted coronavirus and to have been denied medical treatment until it was too late.



- Eman Al Nafjan and Nouf Abdulaziz – women's rights activists arrested in 2018, they have both been sexually assaulted in prison, Al-Nafjan has been further brutalised ahead of her temporary release; Abdulaziz has been tortured with electroshocks and remains in prison.

- Bader al-Ibrahim, Mohammed al-Sadiq, Thumar al-Marzouqi, Abdullah al-Duhailan, Naif al-Hindas and Yazed al-Faifi – all arrested on 4 April 2018, they have been denied access to a lawyer and family members – none have been charged, yet all remain in prison. Bader

al-Ibrahim, a dual US/Saudi national is known to have been tortured and placed in prolonged solitary confinement.



Counts Of Human Rights Violations Journalists



Case study: Turki al-Jasser

Turki al-Jasser has not been heard from since his arrest in March 2018.

Al-Jasser wrote about the status of women under Islam, the uprising in Egypt, the plight of the Palestinians, and Iran's role in the region for the Saudi newspaper al-Taqrir. Authorities suspended al-Taqrir in 2015 and in 2018 jailed its editor, Sultan al-Jumairi. There are unconfirmed reports that he died in prison under torture in November 2018.⁶²

Human Rights Activists

“**Human rights activists in Saudi Arabia are an endangered species. One by one they are vanishing – prosecuted, jailed, intimidated into silence or forced into exile - highlighting the authorities’ zero tolerance approach to freedom of expression.**

Lynn Maalouf, Director for Research at Amnesty International’s Beirut office.”

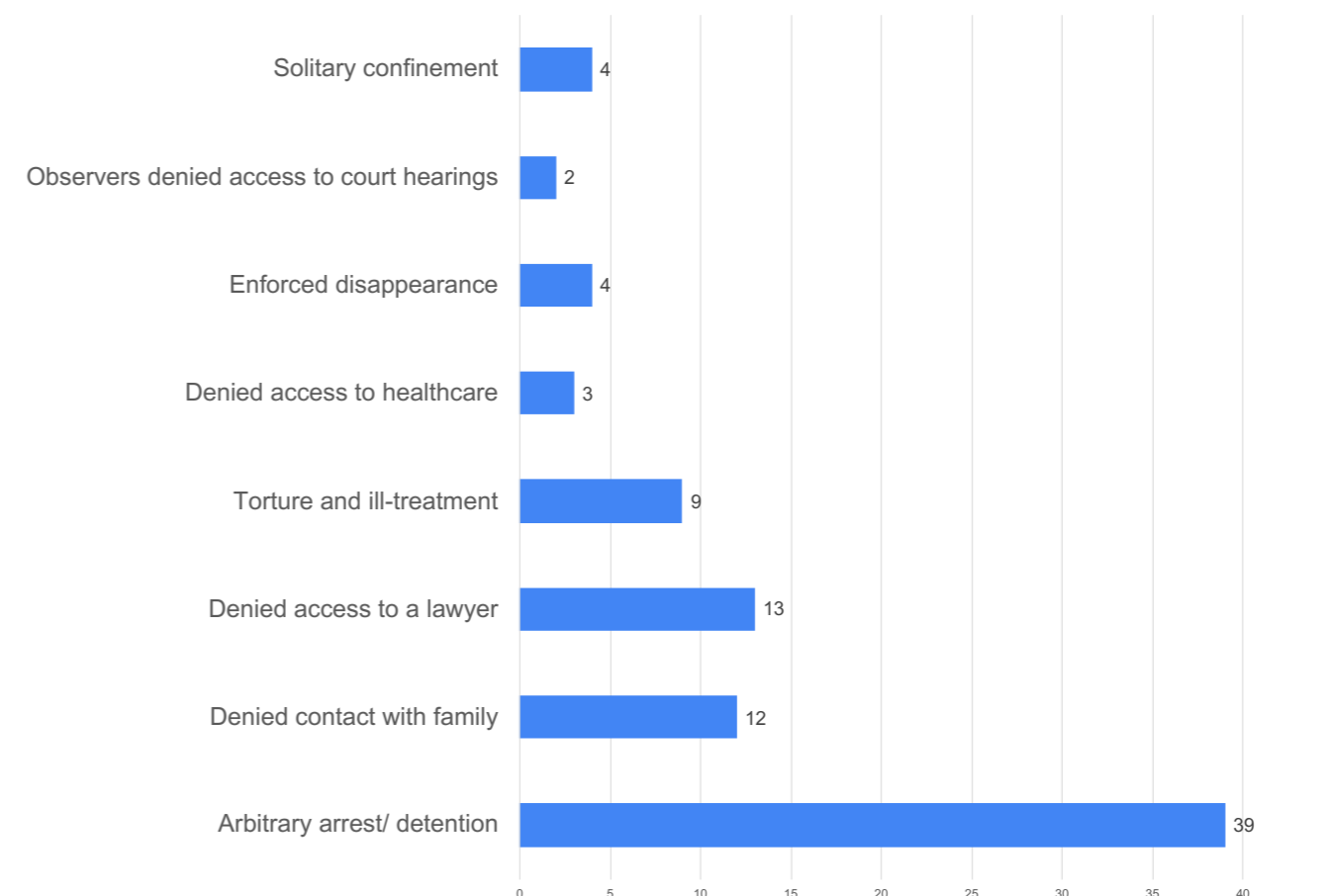
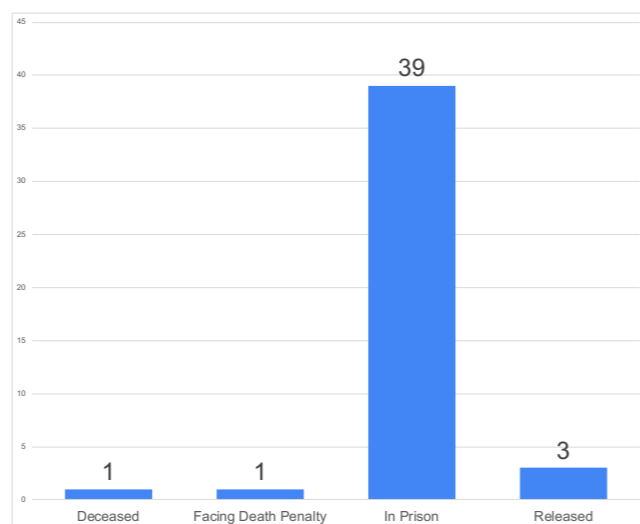
NUMBER OF CASES

44

Incredibly, since this statement was made, the situation has got worse for human rights activists in Saudi Arabia. Activists have faced arbitrary arrest, torture, solitary confinement, and the denial of basic rights such as the right to see their lawyer or family members. Worse still, Abdullah al-Hamid, the former poet, professor and ACPRA member, died in prison in April 2020 following the denial of medical care.

Activists arrested in the MBS era include several further ACPRA members, humanitarians, lawyers, students and bloggers.

They have been arrested on the basis of their tweets, for attending rallies, membership of pro-democracy groups, criticising the regime or campaigning for reform.



Counts Of Human Rights Violations
Human Rights Activists



Case study: Abdulrahman al-Sadhan

Abdulrahman al-Sadhan is a humanitarian. Employed by the Red Crescent in Saudi Arabia, Abdulrahman was arrested in March 2018, apparently for voicing peaceful opinions on social media.

Since his arrest he has been tortured, held in solitary confinement, separated from his family and forced into hunger strikes. His family are forced to rely on updates on his condition smuggled out of prison by his fellow detainees. He was first able to communicate with his family 23 months after his arrest.

Business Leaders

NUMBER OF CASES

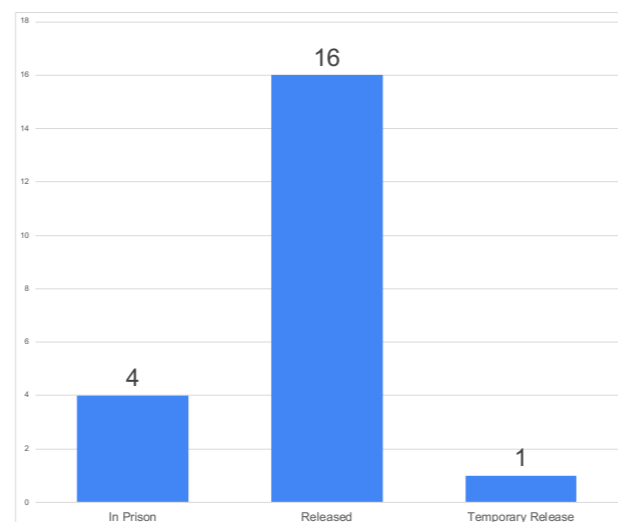
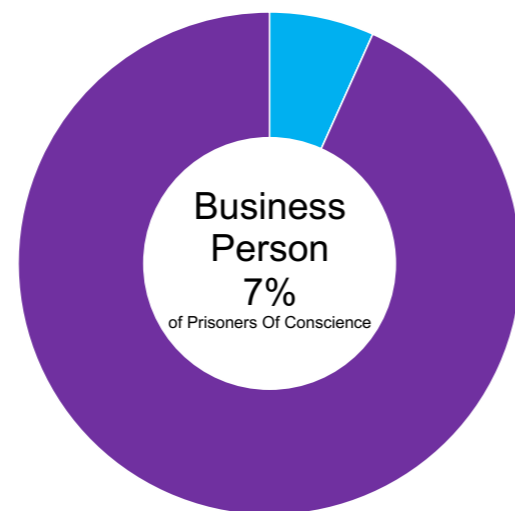
21

In the autumn of 2017 Saudi authorities made a series of mass arrests ostensibly targeting corruption in the Kingdom. Notoriously, senior business people, government officials and members of the Saudi royal family were imprisoned inside the palatial Ritz-Carlton hotel. There are reports that up to 200 people were arrested. Human Rights Watch describes what happened next as extortion.⁶³

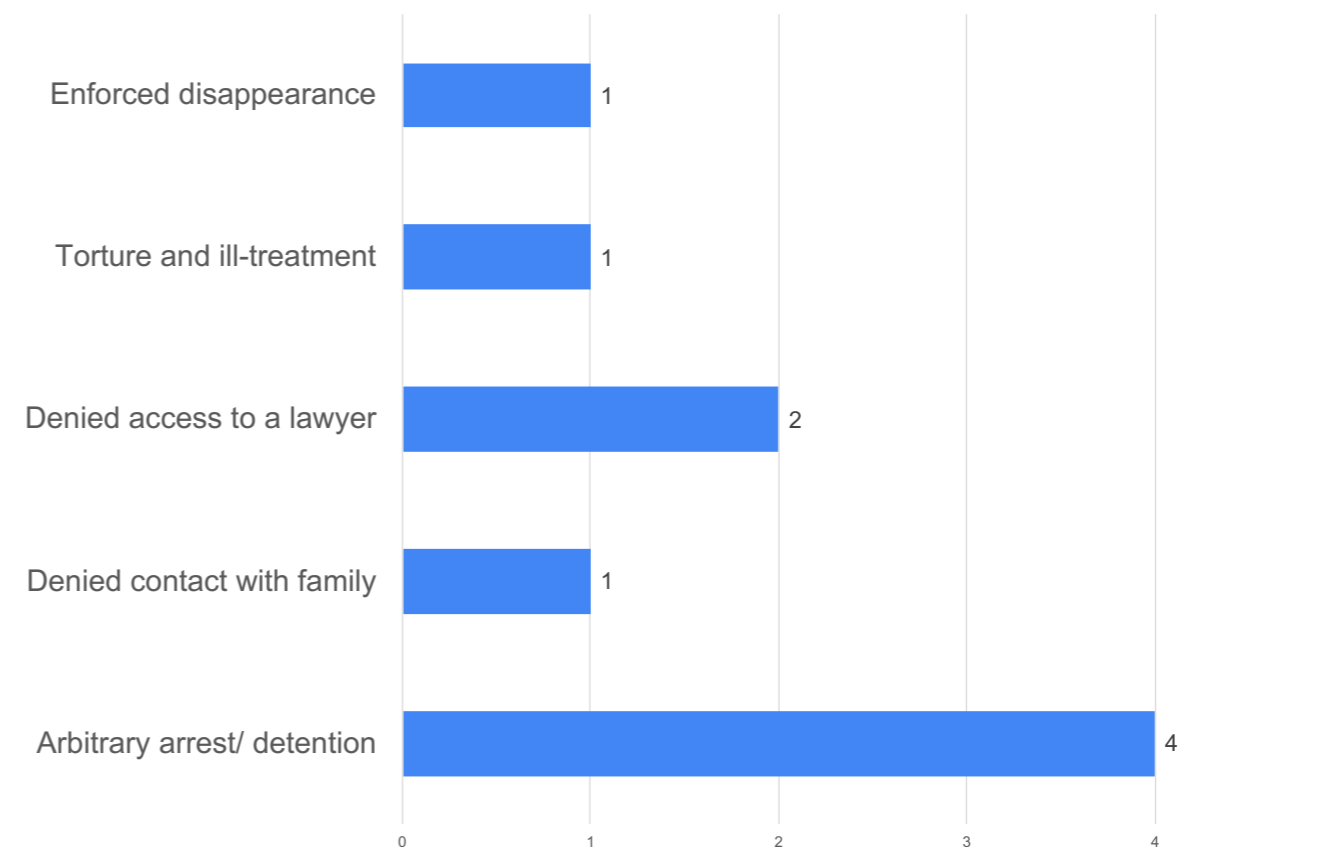
As HRW put it: An informed source with close ties to six men held at the Ritz-Carlton between November 2017 and January 2018 told Human Rights Watch that authorities extorted financial settlements from detainees through physical coercion as well as freezing their bank accounts and banning their relatives from travel abroad. He said that some detainees were forced to transfer money held in bank accounts abroad into the country so that Saudi authorities could seize it, and that authorities only released some detainees after they signed IOUs pledging to pay specified sums of money.

Many reportedly did make deals with the regime in return for their freedom. At least one, Walid Fitahi, is known to have been tortured before his 2019 release – he was assaulted with a whip and electric shocks.

At least four in November 2017 of those arrested remain in prison. They are, Abdulrahman Fakh, Mansour al-Balawi – widely believed to have been one of the richest people in Saudi Arabia,



Nasser bin Aqeel al-Tayyar – an entrepreneur with interests ranging from transport and tourism to retail and real estate, and architect and engineering firm CEO Zuhair Fayeze.



Counts Of Human Rights Violations Business Leaders



Case study: Saleh Kamil

Saleh Kamil was the chairman and founder of the Dallah al Baraka Group (DBHC), one of the Middle East's largest conglomerates, chairman of the General Council for Islamic Banks and the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce.

He was arrested by the Saudi authorities in the Ritz Carlton affair. In March 2017 he was listed by Forbes as a billionaire worth over £2bn. Following the Ritz Carlton incident, he was removed from the list. The collapse in his known wealth fits with briefings from Saudi officials which suggests the crackdown has so far netted the Kingdom in excess of \$100bn.

Artists

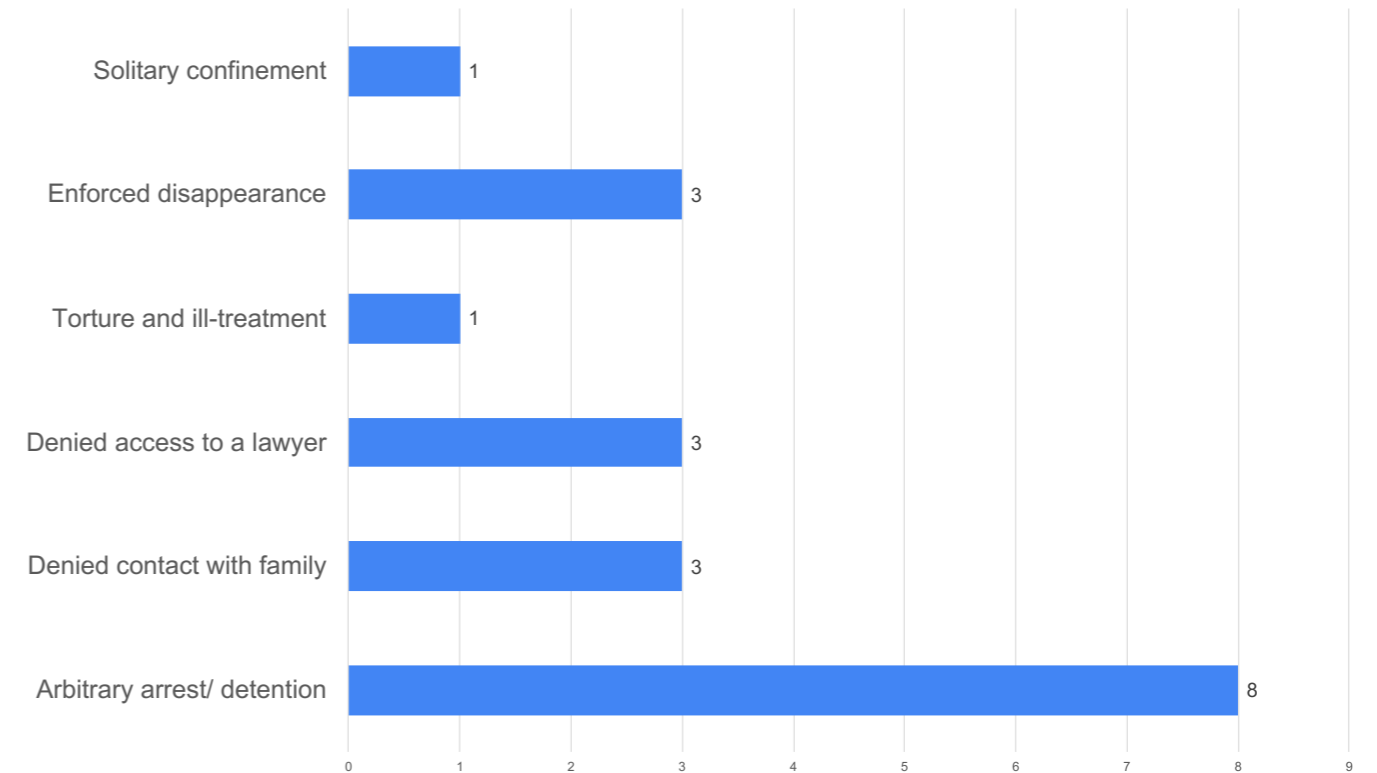
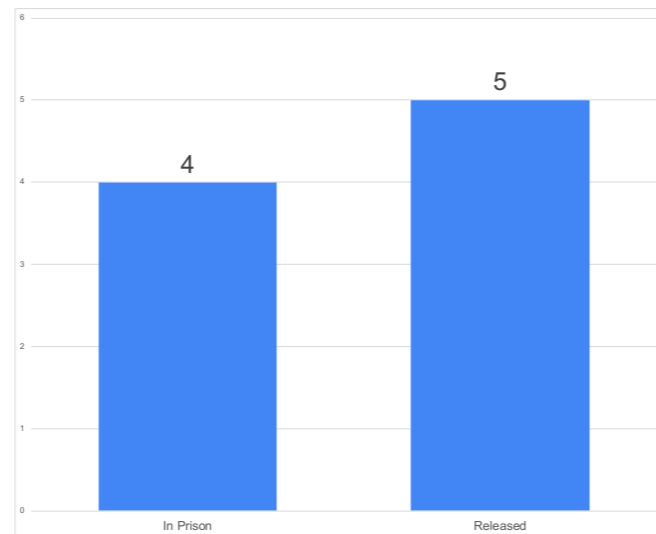
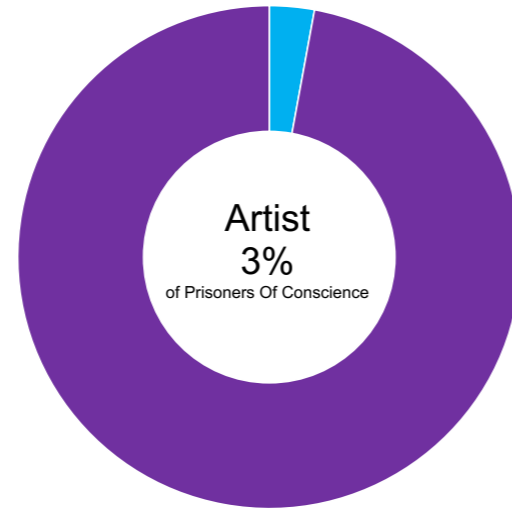
NUMBER OF CASES

9

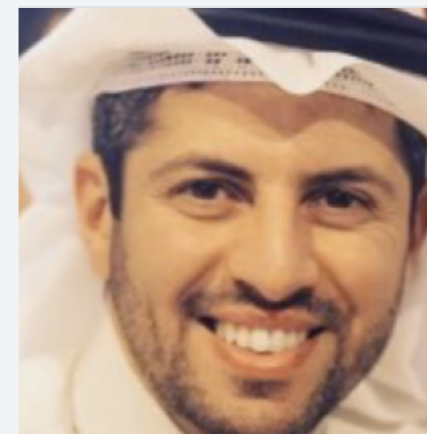
As is common amongst repressive regimes through time and around the world, poets, musicians and artists have not been safe from attacks on free speech and free expression.

We know of at least 9 artists held as prisoners of conscience in the MBS era. They include the poet and novelist Fawaz Al-Ghuslan who was arrested in the 2017 September purge, the poet Ali al-Zaal – arrested on the strength of his tweets, he was in prison for 9 months before any proper legal process began - and the musician Rabee Hafez, profiled below.

Artistic expression is of course heavily censored in Saudi Arabia, as well as the arrests documented here, the regime censors everything from Netflix to newspapers. The Kingdom ranks as the CPJ's 4th most censored country.⁶⁴



Counts Of Human Rights Violations Artists



Case study: Rabee Hafez

Rabee Hafez is a composer and singer, with a record of supporting the Palestinian people both in his songs and in his activism.

Before his arrest, his last tweet was a song for “The heroes of Palestine” and the one before a retweet of Khaled Al-Alkami (also a prisoner) condemning the arrests of clerics and public figures.

Arrested in September 2017 and sentenced to three years, Hafez nevertheless remains in prison where he has endured prolonged solitary confinement and been denied access to either his family or a lawyer.

Religious Figures

NUMBER OF CASES

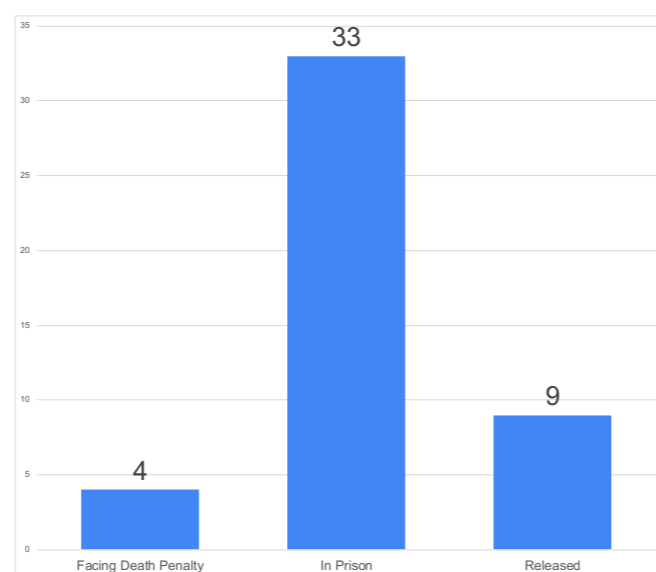
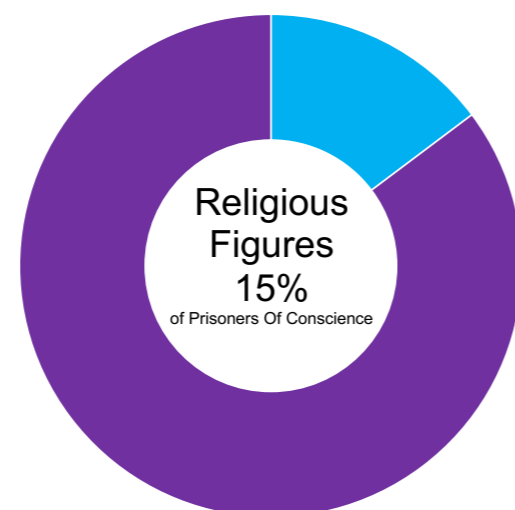
46

As noted in the introductory chapters of this report, although the Saudi state is an absolute monarchy it is not true to say that there are no other powers in the land. Religious figures in Saudi Arabia have always wielded a significant ability to influence the public and the politics of the Kingdom.

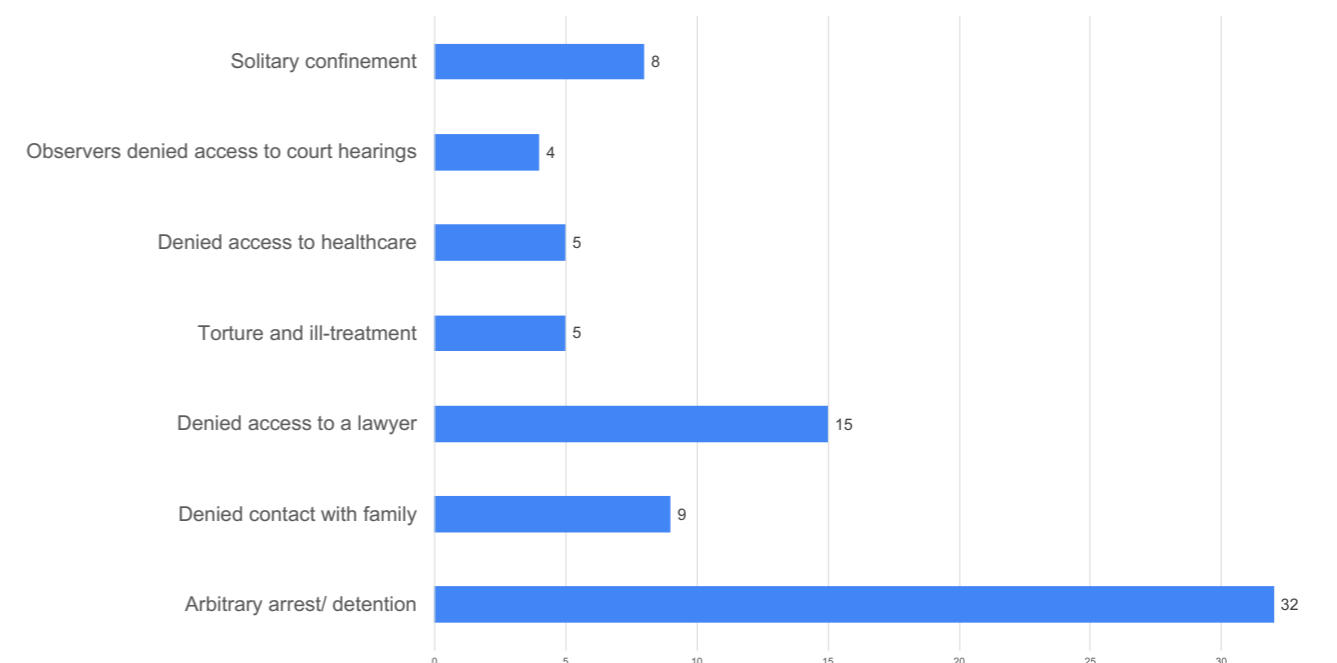
On his ascent to the Crown, one of Mohammed bin Salman's first acts was to prepare for and carry out his September purge. 27 religious figures were arrested in September 2017 alone. The victims of that 'September Purge' – 63 in all – have been tortured, held in prolonged solitary confinement, denied urgent health care, and as noted above, four of the religious leaders arrested that month today face the death penalty. Just two have been permanently released.

In moving decisively against leading religious figures in the Kingdom – many whose social media footprints are counted in the millions – the MBS regime further cementing its grip on power structures within Saudi Arabia. The deliberate targeting of high-profile figures is an unmistakable show of strength.

The charges faced by religious figures arrested by the regime range across the piece, essentially boiling down to 'too liberal', 'too conservative or extreme', or simply a different interpretation of scripture. It is important to note that the Saudi regime frequently uses accusations of terrorism in order to smear political opponents such as the



women's rights activist Loujain al-Hathloul. Where the Saudis have evidence of extremist intent they should try the accused in open court based on the evidence.



Counts Of Human Rights Violations Religious Figures



Case study: Salman al-Odah

An iconic religious reformer and one of Saudi Arabia's leading proponents of political reform and human rights. He is a prominent media figure who boasts more than 14 million followers on Twitter.

In 2011 he was a lead signatory in the petition: 'Towards a State of Rights and Institutions'⁶⁵. Its demands included an elected parliament with real powers and the appointment of a prime minister distinct from the king and accountable to the parliament as well as an independent judiciary.

Salman al-Odah has frequently been arrested, and held by the Saudi state, beginning in 1994. Most recently, he was arrested in 2017, from which he continues to be held awaiting trial. In making the arrest, security officers made clear that the reason for his arrest was a Twitter post in which he had welcomed a phone conversation between the Emir of Qatar and the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia as a step towards resolving the current Gulf crisis. In the tweet he said: "Praise the Lord... O God, soften their hearts toward each other for the good of their peoples."

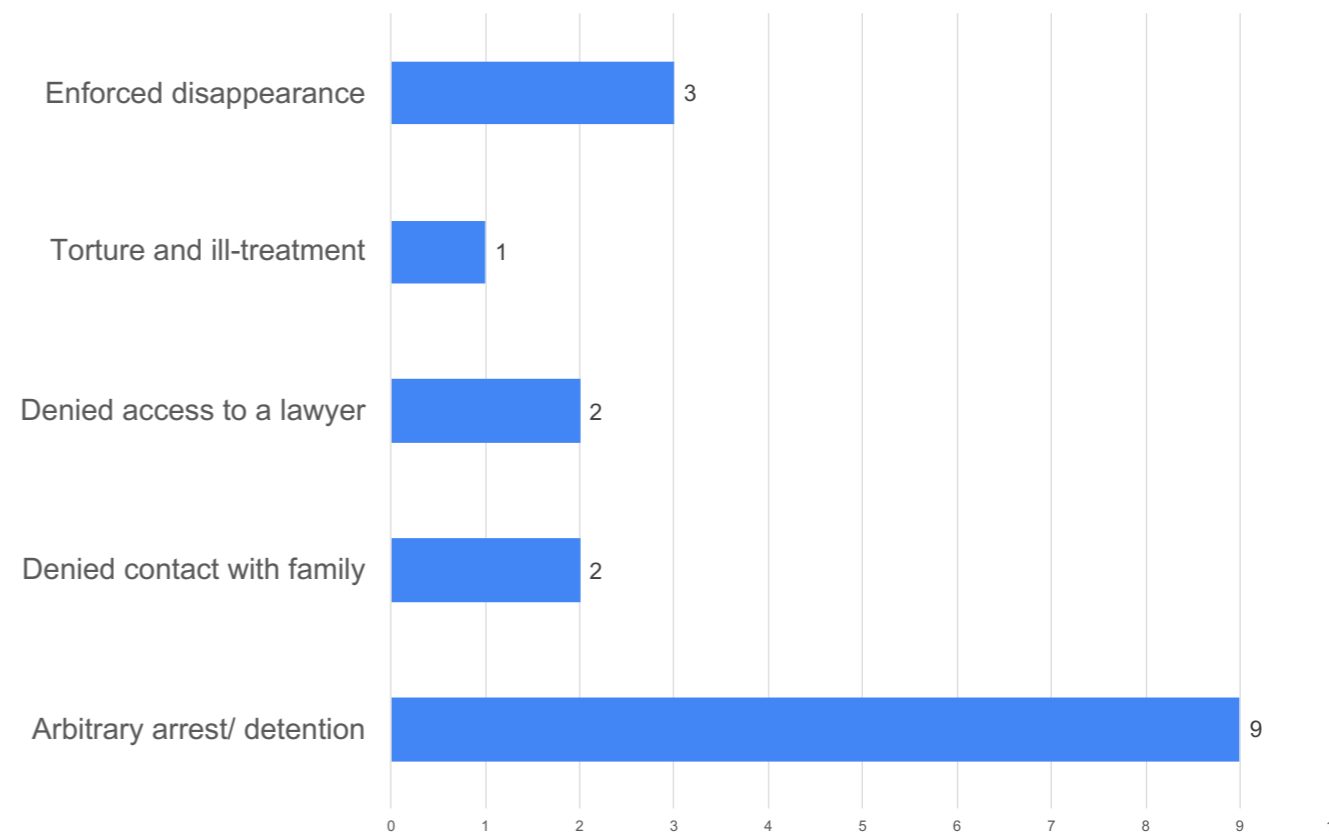
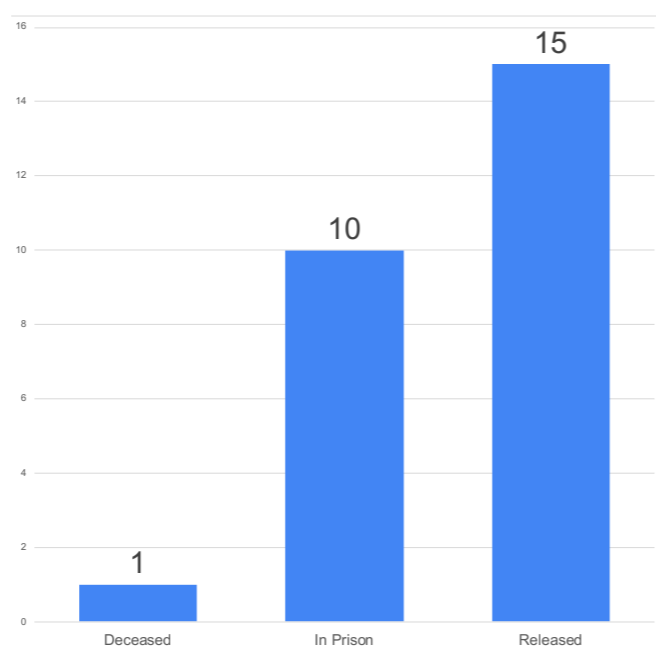
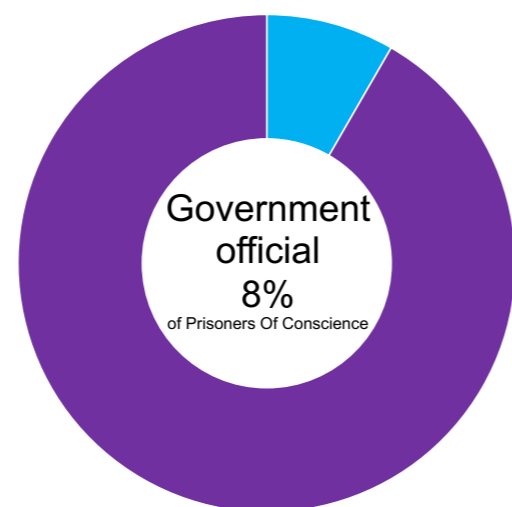
Government Officials

NUMBER OF CASES

26

The powerful and influential figures arrested in November 2017 included several government officials who had fallen foul of the MBS regime. Among those arrested were the former Director of the 'anti-extortion crimes unit', former ministers and mayors, military experts, royal household officials and judges. Most of those arrested have been released without charge however eight remain in prison including Abdullah bin Sultan bin Mohammad al-Sultan, a former commander of the Royal Saudi Navy.

In addition, government workers aren't immune to the sort of arbitrary arrests that sees innocent people incarcerated for the mildest criticism of public administration. In 2020, Hezam Al Ahmari, a government employee at Jeddah seaport, was arrested by the secret police three days after he posted a TikTok video criticising the proximity of a nightclub to his house and the local mosque. In the video, al-Ahmari linked his criticism to Vision 2030. Since his arrest his family, however, has not been able to confirm his location as he has been denied any contact or visits from his family lawyer.⁶⁶



Counts Of Human Rights Violations Government Officials



Case study: Adel Fakih

The Ritz Carlton arrests included the detention of four former ministers including former planning minister Adel Fakih.

Adel Al Fakih was removed as minister of economy and planning on the eve of the November 2017 arrests, and activists believe that the arrest of Dr. Walid Fitaihi, the founder and CEO of the International Medical Centre in Jeddah, who is related to Fakih by marriage, is connected to his arrest.

Fakih, along with the majority of those arrested with him was released shortly after his arrest. Many of those released agreed a financial settlement with the regime. Saudi Arabian officials say the anti-corruption campaign has netted more than \$106 billion (Dh389 billion, 400 billion riyal) in financial settlements.

Academics

NUMBER OF CASES

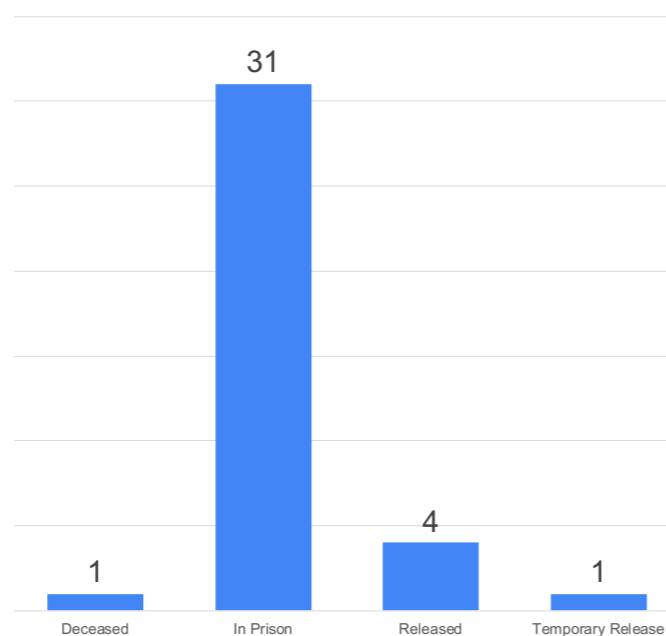
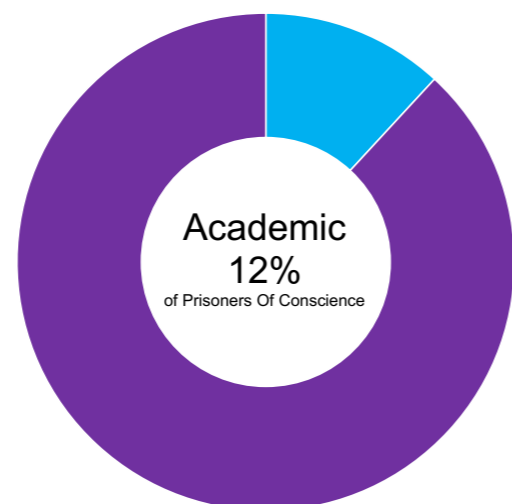
37

One of the least understood and documented categories of political prisoner in Saudi Arabia are the academics. There is an undeniable lack of free expression and free thought on Saudi campuses. The US State Department notes that academics reportedly practiced self-censorship, and authorities prohibited professors and administrators at public universities from hosting meetings at their universities with foreign academics or diplomats without prior government permission.⁶⁷

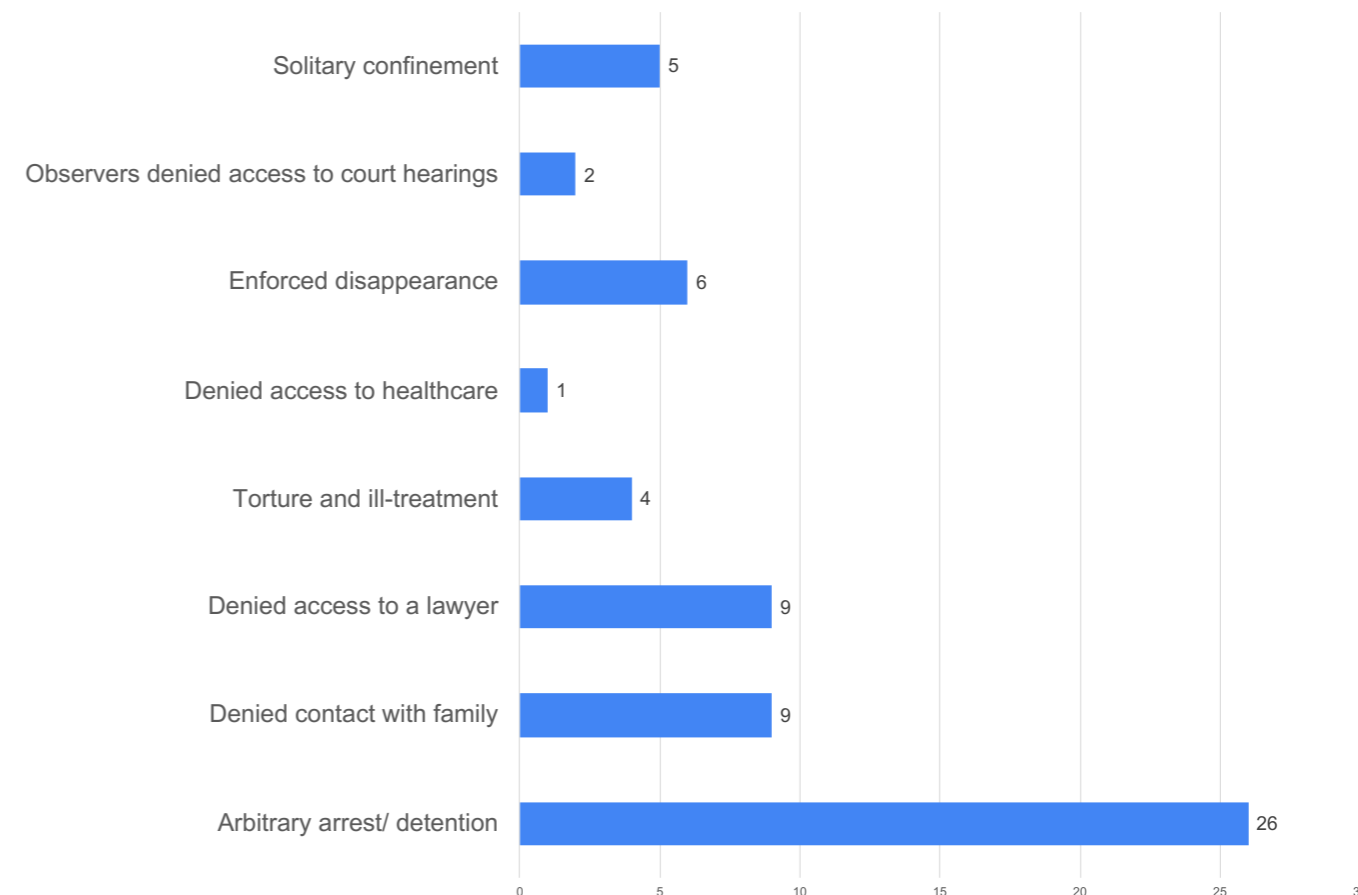
We have found evidence of 37 academics held as prisoners of conscience in the Kingdom (26 arrested in 2017 alone). Of those, 26 suffered arbitrary detention, 9 have been denied access to their families, 4 have been tortured, and 5 held in prolonged solitary confinement.

Those arrested include Razin Mohammed al-Razin, Chairman of the Executive Council of the Consumer Protection Association, Professor of Hisbah and Control, and a member of the faculty at Imam Muhammad bin Saud Islamic University. He is believed to have been arrested because of his objection price hikes for medication.

Abdullah al-Maliki is a prominent reformist academic and writer known for his support for human rights. Before his arrest, his last tweet read, “Whatever the form of the political system that you propose and believe in; There is nothing more dangerous or worse than the will of one man over



the people” and has repeatedly spoken out against the normalisation of relationships with Israel.



Counts Of Human Rights Violations
Academics



Case study: Abdul Rahman al-Shumayri

Abdul Rahman al-Shumayri is accused of seeking to establish his own political party. For this crime he has been sentenced to 15 years in prison and a 15-year travel ban. He has been tortured and denied access to his family and a lawyer. In 2013, Amnesty International said he had been ‘imprisoned solely on the basis of [his] peaceful activism’. Seven years on, he remains in prison⁶⁸.

Family Members

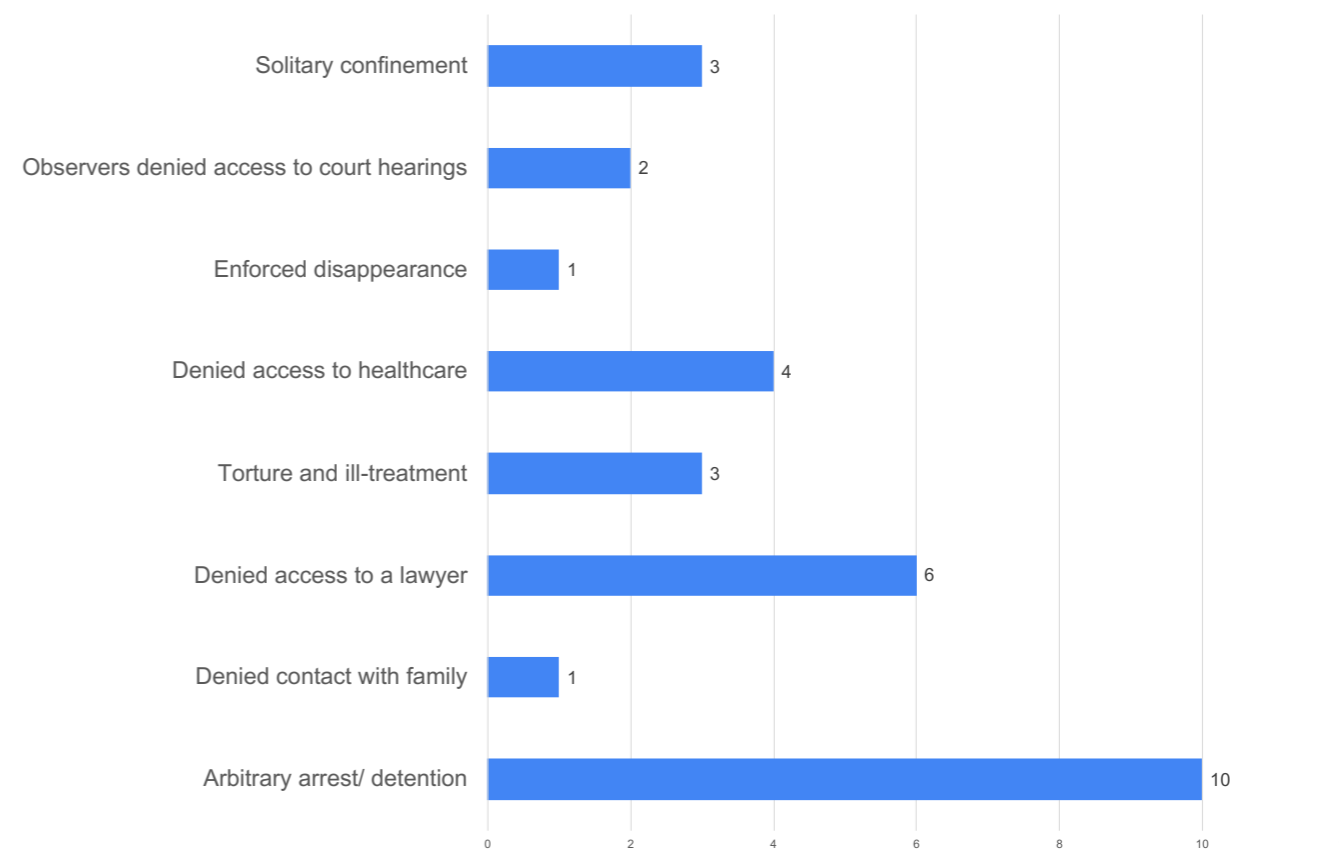
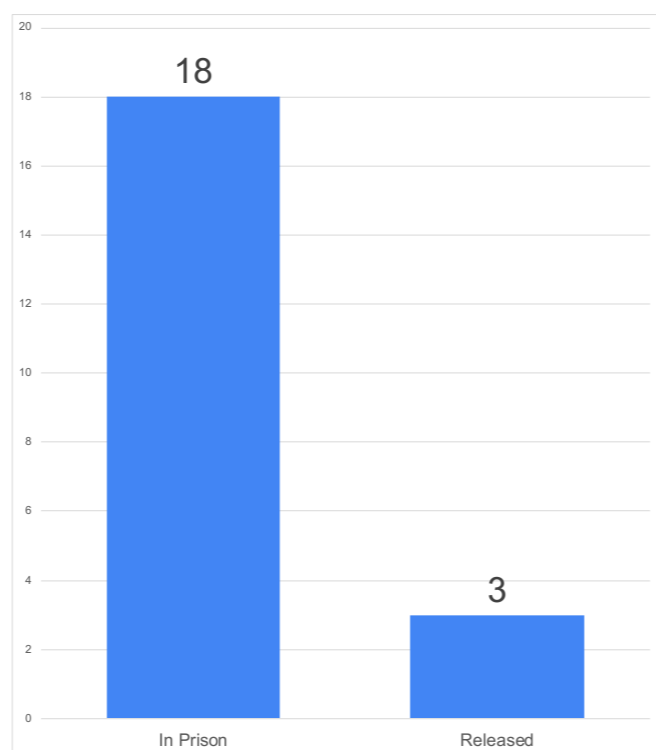
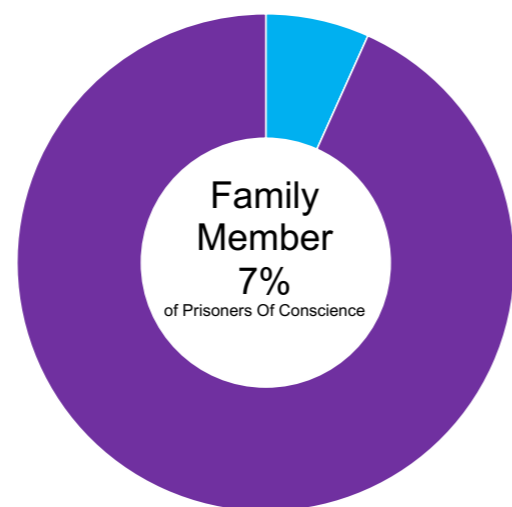
NUMBER OF CASES

21

One of the most insidious and disturbing habits of the Saudi security forces is the arrest of family members of political prisoners. They have been arrested for as little as showing support for their loved ones, or simply through association. They have been tortured, held in solitary confinement, and held without access to their families or lawyers.

They include Aida al-Ghamdi, mother of the activist Abdullah al-Ghamidi who lives in exile, and two of his brothers, Sultan and Adel. Khaled al-Odah, the brother of Salman al-Odah, appears to have been arrested simply for tweeting the fact that his brother had been arrested. Three sons and the brother of Safar Al-Hawali, as well as his secretary, faced arrest in July 2018 and remain in prison.

We have evidence of at least 21 prisoners arrested due to their association with targets of the regime. Of those, 16% have never been charged and just two have been released.



Counts Of Human Rights Violations

Family Members



Case study: Aida al-Ghamdi

Aida al-Ghamdi and her youngest son Adel were arrested and brutalised by Saudi authorities in March 2018. Aida's son, Abdullah al-Ghamidi is a human rights activist granted political asylum in the UK in 2012. He has written movingly about his mother's condition for Euronews. He writes:

"the circumstances of their arrest makes it clear that my activism was the cause. On the same day as their arrest, my house in the city of Dammam, about 1200km from Jeddah, was raided by a large armed force. My other brother, Sultan Al-Ghamdi was then also arrested without a warrant of any kind.

"My mother and brother were tortured in front of each other after they were arrested. They were severely beaten and cigarettes were extinguished on their skin. They were all kept in solitary confinement for extended periods of time. My brother was forced to record a video denouncing me and my activism. The video was widely shared on social media by official Saudi channels. I was then told that any contact with my family members would endanger their lives further." ⁶⁹

Royals

NUMBER OF CASES

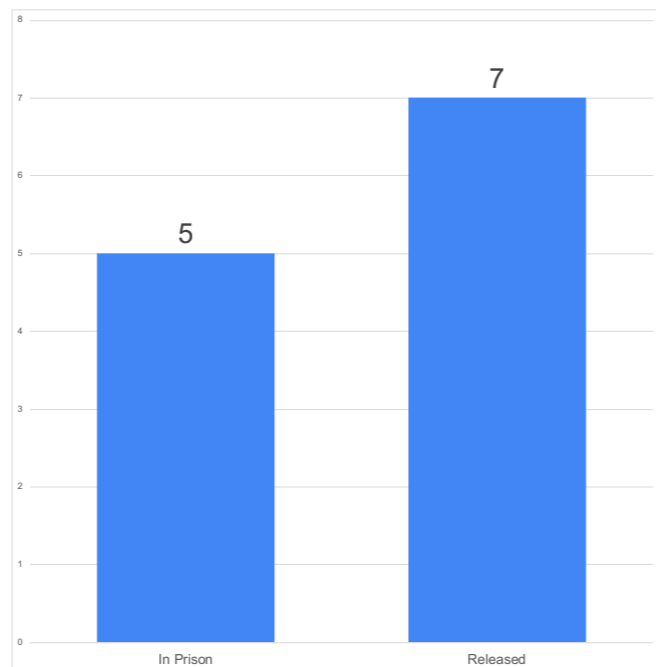
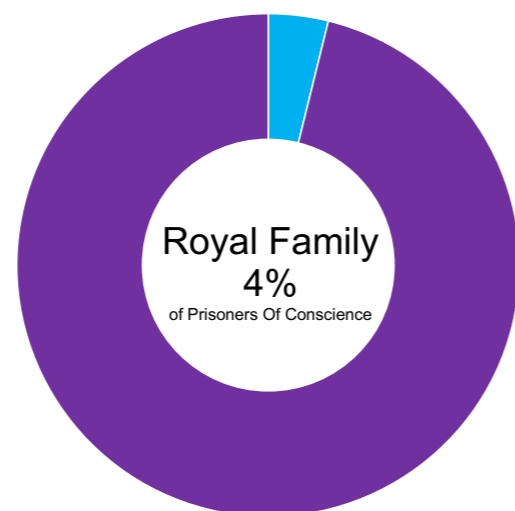
12

The Ritz-Carlton arrests of November 2017 represented a brutal assertion of political power by the then new Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. Many of those targeted were connected to his father's predecessor as King, King Abdullah. Some of those imprisoned were his sons, their arrests signifying the crushing of a rival powerbase at the top of Saudi society.

Of those arrested in November 2017, at least two remain in prison. They are Prince Abdulaziz bin Salman bin Mohammad Al Saud and Prince Turki bin Abdullah.

Two months later, the second tranche of arrests saw Prince Salman bin Abdulaziz bin Salman Al Saud, Prince Fahd bin Abdullah bin Mohammad Al Saud detained, who also remain in prison.

Very little is known of the four royals who remain in prison, despite efforts by NGOs in August of this year – led by MENA Rights Group and ALQST – to force the regime to disclose details of their condition through the submission of a request for an opinion to the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention (WGAD).



Case study: Turki Bin Abdullah

Turki Bin Abdullah, son of King Abdullah, was arrested as part of the Ritz Carlton crackdown along with members of his entourage.

NBC reports that detainees were coerced, abused and tortured, including deprived of sleep, beaten and interrogated with their heads covered. Seventeen were hospitalized, according to the New York Times.

Major General Ali al-Qahtani, a senior aide to Bin Abdullah, and former aide to his father, died in custody. The Saudi authorities have yet to offer an official explanation in the case. Today, Turki Bin Abdullah remains in prison – his whereabouts and condition unknown.



The Ritz-Carlton Riyadh that was used as a jail
November 5th, 2017

Died In Custody

NUMBER OF CASES

4

It is a tragic inevitability that with so many prisoners of conscience treated so badly – beaten, abused, sexually assaulted, psychologically tortured and denied medical assistance – that there will be deaths in custody or in the days immediately following the release of a prisoner. It is impossible to know how many of those whose whereabouts remain unknown are still alive. We do however know of at least four who have died in custody (or in the days after release from terminal illness brought on in prison) – they are profiled below:



Case study: Saleh al-Shehi

Saleh al-Shehi died on July 19 2020 immediately after his release. He is believed to have contracted coronavirus and to have been denied medical treatment until it was too late. Arrested on 3 January 2019, he worked under murdered Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi during the latter's tenure as editor of Al-Watan. In February 2018, al-Shehi was sentenced to five years in prison for "insulting the royal court" after a TV appearance criticizing corruption in the Kingdom. Al-Shehi was a close ally of Jamal Khashoggi, who had campaigned for reform in the Kingdom and an end to political and financial corruption.⁷⁰



Major General Ali al-Qahtani

Major General Ali al-Qahtani died in custody during the notorious Ritz Carlton incident in November 2017. Al-Qahtani was a senior aide to King Abdullah – King Salman's predecessor who died in 2015, and then his son Turki. The circumstances of the Major General's death are not well known, however leaks from inside the Ritz Carlton suggest the more than 200 detainees – all held without charge within the hotel after a wave of arrests of political rivals of MBS and his wider team – were beaten and abused by their captors. Reports suggest al-Qahtani 'may have been tortured to death'. Sources told the New York Times that the general's "neck was twisted unnaturally as though it had been broken."⁷¹



Case study: Abdullah al-Hamid

Abdullah al-Hamid is a former poet, professor and founder member of ACPRA (The Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association) who campaigned for human rights throughout his life. He was sentenced to 13 years in prison in March 2011. Whilst incarcerated, al-Hamid suffered chronic ill-health. An urgent procedure on his heart was repeatedly delayed until he eventually suffered a stroke on April 9, 2020, which caused his death two weeks later. In June 2020 several UN Special Procedures mandate holders issue a letter of allegation (AL SAU 8/2020) expressing concern that the delay to Al Hamid's medical treatment may have arbitrarily deprived him of his right to life⁷².



Case study: Ahmad Al-Ammari

Ahmad Al-Ammari, is a former dean of the Quran Faculty in the Islamic University of Medina. He was first detained in September 2018 and died in custody in January 2019. Al-Hawali was arrested shortly after he published a 3,000-page book which included criticism of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman⁷³. It is believed that al-Ammari died following a severe brain haemorrhage in early January 2019. While some campaigners have suggested medical negligence, ALQST Director Yahya Assiri has argued his death, "is a case of murder in custody."⁷⁴

PART THREE: ACTIVISM

In the chapters above we have detailed the injustice, abuse and torment facing prisoners of conscience in Saudi Arabia under Mohammed Bin Salman. But we do not believe this is the end of the story.

As we set out earlier in this report, the Saudi regime under MBS faces an uncertain future. As the world transitions away from fossil fuels, so in turn the Kingdom is seeking to transition its economy away from its own reliance on oil. To do this, the current regime has begun an unprecedented PR campaign. By definition, that means the Saudi regime is sensitive to its global reputation which in turn provides an unprecedented opportunity to force progressive change in the Kingdom.

In recent years we have seen public pressure yield results.

External pressure works

“There is a variety of views. Some people say it doesn’t matter what other people think of us, what is important is to do what is right for our country, and if people knowingly break our laws they should be punished according to those laws. Other people say it isn’t worth it, let them out, let them live their lives and ignore them.”

These words should of course be taken with a pinch of salt but they do clearly suggest that there are actors within government who are sensitive to political and media pressure. Indeed, although the specific causation of any specific action of the Saudi government is hard to divine, there are numerous episodes from the release of prisoners to the end to particular abuses that have been widely attributed to external pressure.

As this report goes to press, the Saudi Ambassador to the UK has discussed the case for clemency for prisoners of conscience in the Kingdom. His words are worth printing in full.

“People ask: is it worth the damage it is causing you, whatever they did? That is a fair argument to make and it is a discussion we have back at home within our political system and within our ministry.



“
This is my country, I write for the people, my cause is the people, I write on behalf of the people.
”

SALEH ALSHEHI, SAUDI JOURNALIST AND WRITER (1976 - 2020)



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G20 AND BEYOND

Given evidence that the Saudi regime is at least in part susceptible to external political and media pressure, it therefore follows that human rights activists around the world are not powerless. Instead we believe coordinated action can help free prisoners of conscience in the Kingdom.

Direct Action

In September this year, Freedom Forward led a coalition of global human rights groups including ALQST, MENA Rights Group and Action Corps in a coordinated call for city leaders to boycott the U20 event – part of the wider G20 process⁷⁵. That work, combined with media pressure, led to three major city leaders – the Mayors of New York, Los Angeles and London, announcing boycotts of the event⁷⁶. The G20 Process is undeniably a major plank in the Saudi PR campaign – public relations disasters like coordinated boycotts by world leaders put a serious dent in that strategy. If the regime sees that potential PR successes turn into defeats because the world as one refuses to give even tacit approval to the Kingdom, but instead publicly condemns its human rights record, as these three leaders have done, then the regime will be forced to change course.

Similarly, the popular journalist Zarha Hankir publicly refused to compère the W20 event⁷⁷ – the stream of the G20 process focussed on women. In many senses, of course, it is a wonder that anyone could attend such an event – albeit in the age of Covid, virtually – while Loujain al-Hathloul, Nassima al-Sada, and ` ` other campaigners languish in prison, tortured and abused for campaigning for women's rights.

Nevertheless Zara's stand is to be applauded and marks another essential plank in the global battle for human rights in Saudi Arabia.

The US-based NGO Freedom Forward, together with a coalition of other organisations have successfully campaigned to secure 45 members of congress calling on The outgoing secretary of state to drop out of the G20 summit, 413 members of parliament have passed a resolution to downgrade EU representation at the summit, and 20 UK MPs calling on the British government to reconsider its participation.⁷⁸

Outside the G20 process, like many other oppressive regimes in recent years, the Saudi public relations campaign has sought to benefit from an association with popular sport – commonly referred to as 'sports-washing'.

In the first half of 2020, the Saudi Public Investment Fund – the regime's sovereign wealth fund, therefore effectively controlled by the Crown Prince as his team – sought to engineer the purchase of Newcastle United Football Club, one of the best supported clubs in the richest and most popular sporting league in the world, the English Premier League. Grant Liberty, alongside other groups such as Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and Fair Square, campaigned vigorously against the sale. Ultimately, the sale fell through, not least because of a commercial dispute between the Saudi regime and the Premier League relating to broadcasting rights⁷⁹, but the clear intention to use the world game to increase the Kingdom's soft power was clear.

In a similar vein, Saudi Arabia announced its first women's golf events – part of the Ladies European Tour, in March. The leading Brit on the tour, Meghan Maclaren withdrew from the event, stating clearly a refusal to be complicit in the regime's attempts at sportswashing⁸⁰. The events were initially delayed due to Coronavirus, however, at time of writing the Aramco Saudi Ladies International and the Saudi Ladies Team International were due to take place between the 12 and 19th of November. As part of the global campaign against Saudi sportswashing Lina



al-Hathloul wrote to the leading players on the Ladies European Tour begging them to boycott the event.

At time of writing, in the coming weeks Saudi Arabia is expected to host the G20 from Riyadh. The ongoing Coronavirus will rob the regime of the sorts of pictures they will have expected when they took on the presidency of the G20. Nevertheless the event marks a seminal moment in the MBS regime. World leaders are left with a binary choice – either attend and become complicit in the human rights abuses in the Kingdom, or take a stand. The European Parliament has urged the EU to snub the summit⁸¹, and Grant Liberty is part of a global coalition of activists calling on government to boycott the event. As a minimum, governments should insist on the release of prisoners of conscience as the price for their attendance.

Nothing is set in stone.

As this report goes to press, Donald Trump – MBS’s most significant international ally – is reluctantly preparing to leave the White House. His successor – Joe Biden has talked about the Saudi regime in a completely different way – he has described the Kingdom as a pariah, pledging an end to the Trump-era ‘blank cheque’ in the face of human rights abuses.

In this new global order, MBS’ Vision 2030 looks increasingly precarious, and as we have seen, we know actors within the regime are at least acknowledging pressure from the international community to release of prisoners of conscience.

So the lesson to activists is clear - now is the time to redouble our efforts. Saudi Arabia cannot succeed in a post-oil economy if it remains a pariah. The Kingdom’s rulers are by necessity more susceptible to political lobbying than ever before. If activists keep campaigning, if we keep showcasing the stories and the voices of the victims of this regime, if we keep lobbying our own governments and those around the world, change can come.

For MBS and the Saudi regime our message is clear - a wave of change is coming. Now is the time to do the right thing. Your economy, your national strategy and your regime will not survive growing international disgust at the abuses you inflict on your own people. Acting now is in your own interests. Free your prisoners of conscience before that wave destroys your entire government.

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