



Research Report | UNHRC

Forum: United Nations Human Rights Council

Issue: Addressing the Human Rights Abuses in Saudi Arabia

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Welcome Letter

Good day delegates!

Welcome to the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC), a committee that tackles everything concerning the protection and promotion of human rights around the world! As your chair, I'm expecting to see solutions that meaningfully cater to its stakeholders, especially with the agenda items for this committee. Be sure to also work within the limitations of the UNHRC's mandate, as this may ultimately make or break the feasibility of your solutions. Lastly, I hope you all enjoy your experience at the conference, whether this is your first...or your tenth...or your twentieth. I hope this conference proves to be a learning experience for you!

Regards,

Regina Giselle R. Balagot

UNHRC Deputy Chair



Background

Historically, Saudi Arabia has been ruled by the Saudi Royal family, the Saud Dynasty. The Saud Dynasty has governed over Saudi Arabia through an absolute monarchy, which oversees the entire country both culturally and legally. Prior to the Saud family's consolidation of power, the region had little to no wealth until the discovery of oil. The country's newfound wealth benefitted Saudi's citizens, but was also allegedly corrupted by the Saud Dynasty to support their lavish lifestyles. Thus, their corruption of public funds, along with the Gulf War (1990-1991) ultimately fostered civil discontent with the Saud Dynasty ([Philby et al., 2024](#)).

Furthermore, Saudi Arabia's official constitutions are the Holy Quran and the Prophet's Sunnah, however, Former King Fahd bin Abdulaziz al Saud released a document in 1992 called the "Basic Laws of Government" which has elements similar to a constitution ([Saudi Arabia 1992 \(Rev. 2013\) Constitution - Constitute, n.d.](#)).

Given that the country follows an absolute monarchy, there are no free elections, nor are there any publicly elected officials. Since the country has no free elections, Saudi Arabia has been deemed "Not Free" by the Economists' Democracy index in 2023 with a rating of 8 out of 100 (["Democracy Index 2023: Age of Conflict", 2023](#)). Besides its authoritarian regime, the country's low rating can also be attributed to its countless human abuses, especially against what the state deems as "political prisoners" which are typically activists, journalists, and authors.

Most notably, former journalist and activist Jamal Ahmad Khassogi was brutally murdered by the Saudi government in 2018 for his criticism of the policies of the Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salam—the country's de facto ruler ([BBC News, 2021](#)). Khasoggi's death is just one of many that are sanctioned by the Saudi government, with death penalties not just being a frequent practice, but also an unjust one. Former Saudi teacher Muhammed al Ghamdi was also convicted of multiple criminal offenses associated with his peaceful protests online, which led to the Saudi Criminal Court sentencing him to death. The court cited his tweets and other online statements as "evidence" for doing so (["Saudi Arabia: Events of 2023", 2024](#)). An article by Amnesty International also found that there have been 196



people executed by the Saudi government in 2022, with the country having the 2nd highest death toll associated with such ([Amnesty International UK, 2015](#)).

The lack of self-expression observed by the Saudi government are not just the only human rights abuses it commits. The Saudi government's deplorable human rights abuses have also included the LGBTQIA+ and Migrant Workers. Besides restrictive policies and unjust treatment, these groups have also faced various types of abuse—all of which are sanctioned by the Saudi government.

Since the LGBTQIA+ are not legally recognized in Saudi Arabia, and are even branded as 'extremist' by the Saudi government. Furthermore, the country prohibits these kinds of relationships, which are exacerbated by discrimination as a result of the societal stigma against them. Individuals that are caught expressing themselves can experience incarceration, hefty fines, or even the death penalty ([Amnesty International UK, 2015](#)).

Moreover, with the multitude of opportunities in Saudi Arabia, there is a high demand for migrant workers. Thus, these individuals often enter the country legally, or as undocumented migrant workers, through Saudi Arabia's many borders. Most recently, Saudi border guards killed Ethiopian migrant workers and asylum seekers on the Yemen-Saudi border when they attempted to enter the country undocumented between March 2022 and June 2023 ([Saudi Arabia, 2024](#)).

Definition of Key Terms

Term	Definition
Sharia Law	"Sharia, the fundamental religious concept of Islam—namely, its law. The religious law of Islam is seen as the expression of God's command for Muslims and, in application, constitutes a system of duties that are incumbent upon all Muslims by virtue of their religious belief." (Coulson et al., 2024).
Political Prisoners	"A person who is imprisoned because that person's actions or beliefs are contrary to those of his or her government"



	(Dallier et al., 2024).
The Saud Dynasty	“The House of Saud is the ruling royal family of Saudi Arabia. It is composed of the descendants of Muhammad bin Saud, founder of the Emirate of Diriyah, known as the First Saudi state (1727–1818), and his brothers, though the ruling faction of the family is primarily led by the descendants of Abdulaziz bin Abdul Rahman, the modern founder of Saudi Arabia” (A Royal Family Tree House of Saud FRONTLINE PBS, 2015).
Absolute Monarchy	“An absolute monarchy is a form of government in which a single person—usually a king or queen—holds absolute, autocratic power. In absolute monarchies, the succession of power is typically hereditary, with the throne passing among members of a ruling family” (Longley, 2021).
Authoritarianism	“Authoritarianism, in politics and government, the blind submission to authority and the repression of individual freedom of thought and action. Authoritarian regimes are systems of government that have no established mechanism for the transfer of executive power and do not afford their citizens civil liberties or political rights” (Lindstaedt, 2024).
Universal Peer Review (UPR)	“The Universal Periodic Review (UPR) is a unique mechanism of the Human Rights Council that calls for each UN Member State to undergo a peer review of its human rights records every 4.5 years” (The Human Rights Council mechanisms and entities, n.d).
The Kafala	“The kafala, or sponsorship, system gives private citizens and companies in Jordan, Lebanon, and most Arab Gulf countries almost total control over migrant workers’ employment and immigration status” (Robinson, 2022).
Death Penalty	“The death penalty is the state-sanctioned punishment of executing an individual for a specific crime” (Death Penalty, n.d).



Major Parties Involved

The Saudi Royal Family

The ruling family of Saudi Arabia, the House of Saud has been responsible for most of the human rights abuses that take place within the country. Whether directly or indirectly, the Saudi Royal Family has been known to be linked to countless human rights violations—they have sanctioned, funded, or even orchestrated these abuses ([Saudi Arabia: Investment Fund Linked to Abuses, 2023](#)).

Political Prisoners

Political prisoners are a very loose term, especially in the case of the human rights abuses committed by Saudi Arabia. They are typically those deemed by the government as “dissident”, and are usually incarcerated—or even killed. Most political prisoners are authors or journalists, with sentences ranging from three to 20 years (Knipp, 2022). These “political prisoners” are crucial to democracy in Saudi Arabia, as even though they are incarcerated or killed, they have constantly held the government accountable. Political prisoners in Saudi Arabia can be labeled as such from a mere tweet or social media post about their dissatisfaction with the government ([Saudi Arabia: Authorities must abide by recommendations from UN Human Rights Council review, 2024](#)).

LGBTQIIA+

Given that there are no LGBTQIIA+ rights in Saudi Arabia, these individuals are one of the most vulnerable and susceptible groups to human rights abuses in Saudi Arabia. Individuals who are caught doing “homosexual acts” or promoting such behavior are subjected to death penalty (ILGA 12 May 2006; *ibid.* 23 May 2005; Sodomy Laws 2 June 2006; AI LGBT July 2006). Furthermore, the LGBTQ+ Travel Safety Index identifies Saudi Arabia as one of the ‘least friendly countries’ for LGBTQ+ travelers ([Bloom, 2023](#)). As such, one can only wonder about the living conditions of the LGBTQ+ residents of Saudi Arabia.



Migrant Workers

Despite migrant workers being one of the cornerstones of the Saudi economy, they have been subjected to constant abuse and mistreatment. Some of which include domestic, sexual, and verbal abuse, along with unjust arrests and deportations. These migrant workers are also not allowed to contest these arrests or deportations, and are typically enforced on undocumented or illegal migrant workers. Moreover, Saudi is also known to have one of the most restrictive visa sponsorship systems in the world—the Kafala ([“Saudi Arabia: Events of 2023”, 2024](#)).

Timeline

Date	Description of Events
1932	The patriarch of the modern Saud dynasty, Abd al-Aziz ibn Saud, formally establishes Saudi Arabia (A Royal Family Tree House of Saud FRONTLINE PBS, 2015).
1958-59	“The Free Prince” movement was established by Prince Talal, one of the younger sons of Abd al-Aziz ibn Saud, for political reform within the country. However, Prince Talal was exiled to Lebanon, and the movement was ultimately unsuccessful (A Royal Family Tree House of Saud FRONTLINE PBS, 2015).
1991	Saudi women protest against the government through peaceful demonstrations for the right to drive. The demonstration is initially unsuccessful as the Saud family reaffirms the restrictions for women drivers (A Royal Family Tree House of Saud FRONTLINE PBS, 2015).
1992	Former King Fahd bin Abdulaziz al Saud issued the “Basic Laws of Government”, the country’s de facto constitution (A Royal Family Tree House of Saud FRONTLINE PBS, 2015).
Late 1990s	Arab satellite television starts to transmit outside the Saudi monarchy's sphere of influence throughout the region. Reports about Saudi Arabia's shortcomings—such as the dearth of political freedom, civil rights, and royal corruption—are visible to the people of Saudi Arabia for the



	first time. Saudis are exposed to disturbing images of the Arab-Israeli conflict on a regular basis (A Royal Family Tree House of Saud FRONTLINE PBS, 2015).
2012	Raif Badawi, the co-founder of Saudi Liberals, is ultimately sentenced to the death penalty. However, the organization “Human Rights Watch” called for charges to be dropped. The charges against Badawi are lessened to 1,000 lashes, 10 years in prison, and additionally a fine of 1,000,000 Saudi riyals.
2016	Saudi Arabia regains its seat in UNHRC after Russia loses the bid by two votes (How Saudi Arabia Kept its UN Human Rights Council Seat, 2018).
2018	Former Journalist Jamal Khasoggi is murdered in the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul for his critiques against the current Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia (BBC, 2021).
2020	Saudi Arabia loses its seat in UNHRC for the second time (Swart, 2020).
2023	Saudi Arabia regains its seat in the UNHRC.

Possible Solutions

- **Possible Solution 1:** Conducting an investigative study on the human rights abuses in Saudi Arabia.
 - Given the mandate of the UNHRC, conducting a further investigation on the human rights abuses in Saudi Arabia is one of the most viable solutions the committee can propose. This solution has been implemented in similar cases in the past, and can be used as a starting point for more comprehensive strategies, especially in collaboration with other UN agencies.
 - The data collected from the investigation can be used to provide recommendations to Saudi Arabia themselves, or for



collaborations with other committees like the United Nations Security Council, to implement more crucial peacekeeping strategies. However, the main caveat of this solution is that it has already been done before.

- **Possible Solution 2:** Education is not the answer.
 - With the nature of the agenda, solutions should be catered towards education or systematic reform. This is because doing so is not within the committee's mandate, nor is it feasible for the committee to essentially implement systematic reform.
- **Possible Solutions:** Expanding the limitations of the UPR
 - The UNHRC's main mechanism to determine its members is the Universal Peer Review. With the current UPR mechanism allowing Saudi Arabia to retain its membership despite its human rights abuses, the committee can also look into improving the UPR. Specifically, the committee can explore expanding such in a way wherein Saudi Arabia and countries that have similarly committed multiple egregious human rights abuses will be permanently prevented membership.

Useful Resources:

[UPR Report on Saudi Arabia](#)

[UPR Mechanics](#)

[The Basic Laws of Governance](#)

[Timeline of the Saud Family; Saudi Arabia](#)

[UNHRC Mandate](#)