



**Advocacy to free Saudi women's human rights activists
detained since May 2018**



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Women human rights defenders face compounded stigma, not only because of their work as human rights defenders, but also because of discrimination on gender grounds. Women human rights defenders face even more extreme impediments to their freedom of movement, given the restrictive laws governing women in the State. There has been an increase in the targeting of women human rights defenders since the rise in online campaigning for the right of women to drive.

- [World Report on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders](#) - Mr. Michel Forst - United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders, December 2018

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Torture is practiced systematically in Saudi Arabia to extract confessions during interrogations and through-out detention. While detainees have reported informing courts of the torture they have endured, investigations are virtually never conducted into their allegations and coerced confessions are routinely admitted as evidence against them. Techniques of torture and ill treatment typically used include, beatings, flogging, electric shocks, sleep deprivation, solitary confinement, secret detention and threats of raping or killing victims' relatives.

- [Joint NGO report on Saudi Arabia to the UN Committee against Torture](#), March 2019

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TIMELINE of EVENTS

15 May 2018: Saudi Women's Human Rights Activists Arrested

A few weeks before Saudi Arabia lifted a ban on women driving, authorities launched a large scale, coordinated crackdown against women's human rights defenders (WHRDs) in the Kingdom.

✓ May 2018: The Free Saudi Activists Coalition is formed

The Coalition is formed to push for the release of the women's human rights activists. It includes [Women's March Global](#) and partner organisations [CIVICUS](#), [ISHR](#), [ADHRB](#), [GCHR](#), and [Equality Now](#).

✓ May 2018: Women's March Global starts [Change.org](#) petition

The petition calls on the UN to hold Saudi Arabia accountable and demand the release of the activists.

✓ 27 June 2018: UN Experts [lead calls](#) to free Saudi WHRDs

✓ 31 July 2018: Spokesperson for the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights [expresses concern](#) on continuing arrests of Saudi WHRDs

18 October 2018: Saudi Women's Human Rights Activists have been in prison for 5 months

20 October 2018: Saudi Arabia faces backlash regarding the brutal killing of Jamal Khashoggi

World leaders publicly condemn the killing of Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul. Yet the issue of the continued detention of Saudi activists is not at the forefront of this discussion.

20 November 2018: Reports emerge revealing torture of the imprisoned activists

Many of the detained women were subjected to torture, including flogging, sexual assault, and electric shocks.

TIMELINE of EVENTS

● **1 March 2019: Free Saudi Activists Coalition urges all UN Member States to take action**

Signed by over 50 human rights groups, the letter calls for the immediate release of WHRDs. Gulf Centre for Human Rights releases report on torture of WHRDs inside Saudi Prisons - "[Treat Her Kindly](#)".

✓ ● **7 March 2019: Iceland leads 36 UN Member States calling for activists' release**

This is the first time ever that UN Member States have collectively condemned Saudi Arabia at the Human Rights Council.

● **13 March 2019: Saudi Women's Human Rights Activists stand trial**

Several women's human rights activists stand trial for the first time since they were detained the previous year.

● **15 March 2019: The Free Saudi Activists Coalition attends the 63rd Session of the Commission on the Status of Women**

The Coalition participated in a panel discussion, '[Reality of Saudi Women Activists - Over 300 days of imprisonment and gruesome torture](#)', condemning Saudi Arabia and calling for the release of Saudi women's human rights activists.

✓ ● **28 March 2019: Saudi Arabia provisionally releases 2 activists**

Aziza al-Youssef and Emaan al-Nafjan.

✓ ● **2 May 2019: Saudi Arabia provisionally releases 5 activists**

Hatoon Al-Fassi, Amal Al-Harbi, Maysaa al-Manea, Abeer Namankani, and Shadan al-Anezi.

● **15 May 2019: Saudi Women's Human Rights Activists have been in prison for 1 year**

● **18 June 2019: Report - Joint Follow Up NGO Report on Saudi Arabia to the UN Committee Against Torture**

TIMELINE of EVENTS

19 June 2019: [Report](#) released by Agnès Callamard

UN Special Rapporteur (SR) — on the extrajudicial killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi. This report includes the findings that some of the WHRDs in prison stated that a former senior advisor to the Royal Court, Mr. Saud al-Qahtani, was physically present during some of the activists' torture and that he threatened to kill one of the women. In the report by SR Callamard, credible evidence was found warranting a further investigation into al-Qahtani's involvement in the extrajudicial killing of Khashoggi.

June 24 2019: 1 year anniversary of the lift of the driving ban in Saudi Arabia

26 June 2019: The Free Saudi Activists Coalition together with 40 NGOs present a letter to UN Member States at HRC41

The letter calls on the HRC to address ongoing human rights violations in Saudi Arabia and call for the immediate release of imprisoned women's human rights activists.

2 August 2019: Saudi Arabia eases restrictions on male guardianship

Amendments allow women to obtain passports and travel abroad without permission of their male guardians, [however](#) Saudi women still must obtain a male guardian's approval to get married or be released from prison or shelters where they have sought protection from domestic abuse or violence.

September 2019: The Free Saudi Activists Coalition together with [Lina Al-Hathloul](#) (sister of imprisoned WHRD Loujain al-Hathloul) continue advocacy efforts at HRC42

- The Coalition held a [side event](#) to address **The Continued Silencing and Imprisonment of Saudi Women Human Rights Defenders.**
- Lina Al-Hathloul delivered a powerful statement at HRC42, [demanding justice for her sister Loujain Al-Hathloul.](#)

September 2019: Australia leads 23 Members States in calling for an end to the impunity of Saudi Arabia in its continuous human rights violations

Australia delivered the [joint statement](#) at HRC42. The Free Saudi Activists Coalition [called for citizens](#) to tell their governments to sign on to the statement.

TIMELINE of EVENTS



15 May 2020: Saudi Women's Human Rights Activists have been in prison for 2 years

MEANWHILE...

Sportswashing and Whitewashing continues in Saudi Arabia

2017 - 2019: Saudi Arabia's term on the UN Human Rights Council

2018 Saudi Lobbying Campaign in the United States: Saudi Arabia continues aggressive [sportswashing strategy](#) with major league sports in the United States.

2018 - 2020: Saudi Arabia continues to host international sports figures and tournaments - Clash on the Dunes, International European Golf Tour, WWE Debut Match, Supercoppa Italiana Match, The Saudi Cup, Formula One, etc.

2018 - 2020: Saudi Arabia continues to host entertainment superstars in an effort to whitewash ongoing human rights violations: Mariah Carey, the Black Eyed Peas, Sean Paul, Enrique Iglesias, David Guetta, BTS, One Republic, Jason Derulo, Backstreet Boys, etc.

March 2019: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute reports Saudi Arabia [leads](#) as world's largest arms importer between 2014-2018.

September 2019: MBS Misk Foundation moves forward with hosting Youth Forum side event at UN General Assembly after [much controversy](#).

October 2020: Saudi Arabia to run for reelection for 2021-2023 term of UN Human Rights Council.

November 2020: Saudi Arabia to [host](#) G20.

CURRENT OPPORTUNITIES & CHALLENGES



SAUDI ARABIA

The CIVICUS Monitor has rated the Civic Space in Saudi Arabia as **closed**.

What does a Closed Rating Mean?¹

There is complete closure - in law and in practice - of civic space. An atmosphere of fear and violence prevails, where state and powerful non-state actors are routinely allowed to imprison, seriously injure, and kill people with impunity for attempting to exercise their rights to associate, peacefully assemble, and express themselves. Any criticism of the ruling authorities is severely punished and there is virtually no media freedom. The internet is heavily censored, many websites are blocked, and online criticism of power-holders is subject to severe penalties.

Saudi Arabia has been on the CIVICUS Monitor Watchlist in 2019 and 2020 for the rapid and continued deterioration of civic space. While Saudi Arabia has long been rated closed on the CIVICUS Monitor the unprecedented regression of civic space has especially impacted WHRDs living in exile.

1. CIVICUS Monitor - Saudi Arabia: <https://monitor.civicus.org/country/saudi-arabia/>. The CIVICUS Monitor rates the conditions for civil society or civic space. We provide ratings for civic space in 196 countries (all UN member states and Kosovo, Palestine, and Taiwan).



SAUDI ARABIA

Saudi Arabia Overview¹

Despite certain political and social reforms made since the turn of the century, the authorities in Saudi Arabia continue their decades-long clampdown on dissent, human rights activism, and independent reporting through the media. While some informal associational interactions are tolerated, publicly active civil society organisations are almost non-existent. Human rights organisations face brutal repression, including the targeted harassment, imprisonment, torture, and public flogging of their leaders. Women's rights to associate, peacefully assemble, and express themselves are even further violated through an overt, state-driven policy of discrimination based on gender. The 2017 counterterrorism law² increased the authorities' powers to stamp out dissent through wide-ranging clauses that criminalised virtually all dissent. A new civil society law passed in 2019 is thought unlikely to reduce government control of the sector. People in Saudi Arabia have no legal right to freedom of peaceful assembly and can be flogged for taking part in a public demonstration. Excessive force is often used to disperse the few protests that do take place. Free expression is heavily curtailed and although the internet has provided an avenue for discussion for millions of Saudis in recent years, online content is censored and severe penalties are imposed for any criticism of the government that appears on social media. Human rights defenders face travel bans, arbitrary arrests, lengthy prison sentences, flogging, and torture as well as reprisals for interacting with the UN Human Rights Council.

1. CIVICUS Monitor - Saudi Arabia: <https://monitor.civicus.org/country/saudi-arabia/>.

2. Gulf Centre for Human Rights: Report on Women's Human Rights Defenders 2018 - <https://www.gc4hr.org/report/view/90>.



SAUDI ARABIA

Opportunities & Challenges

Saudi Arabia continues to be in the spotlight for its ongoing gross human rights violations. The time is now to hold the government of Saudi Arabia responsible for their continued silencing and oppression of Saudi Women Human Rights Defenders and Activists.

As Saudi Arabia seeks election to the Human Rights Council in October 2020, it must be held accountable. Saudi Arabia seeks to reform its image however this can only happen with the support of foreign governments and businesses.

FUTURE ADVOCACY OPPORTUNITIES

Member States

As Saudi Arabia seeks to be reelected to the Human Rights Council in October 2020 - UN Member States should hold Saudi Arabia accountable for its ongoing human rights violations.

In the past 2 years UN Member States have promoted accountability efforts by:

- Releasing or joining statements at Human Rights Council Sessions (see [Iceland](#) and [Australia](#) led statements);
- Stopping or suspending arms sales to Saudi Arabia;
- Spoken out and called for an end to the ongoing Saudi-led war in Yemen;
- Created opportunities for CSOs, WHRDs, and family members of WHRDs to further advocacy efforts at the Human Rights Council and the UN Commission for Status of Women.

ADVOCACY OPPORTUNITY

During the COVID19 pandemic, advocacy efforts have shifted due to shelter-in-place orders and concomitant restrictions. However, opportunities for advocacy remain the same.

Human Rights Council:

- Member States can continue to release statements on Saudi Arabia. These statements represent ongoing oversight of Saudi Arabia's continued human rights violations and acknowledgement by governments that they will continue to bear witness to the lack of accountability and response by Saudi Arabia on the situation of WHRDs and activists in prison;
- Member States can [reaffirm their commitments](#) on stopping, suspending, or continuing to suspend arms sales to Saudi Arabia.

The G20:

- More than [220 civil society organisations](#) have expressed their concerns about the G20 civil society engagement process as hosted by Saudi Arabia;
- Member States have an opportunity to hold Saudi Arabia accountable at the G20 forum by calling for the release of women's human rights activists from prison, and demanding an investigation into the torture of activists.

Businesses

The work of civil society and human rights defenders is vital to peace, justice, fairness, and sustainability. It is also essential to promote transparency, combat corruption, and maintain a stable and profitable business environment.

It is important that companies recognise Saudi Arabia's strong desire to modernise its image and attract investments. This provides businesses with leverage through which they can contribute to improving the human rights situation.

- Saudi Arabia has been working for the past several years on a public relations campaign to better their global image as a modern country. To this end, they are looking to invest in social infrastructure like healthcare, education, and entertainment, as well as appear as if they are including women in sectors such as sports and business.
- Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman is looking to decrease their dependence on oil that currently makes up 80% of their budget revenues and 45% of GDP.
- The modernisation plan is laid out in Vision 2030. However analysts say that it will be difficult for Saudi Arabia to realise its goal for economic reform and without foreign investment.

Given the advocacy opportunities around Saudi Arabia's hosting of the G20 in 2020, companies - in particular those participating in the B20 - should use their leverage to push for the release of the detained Saudi women's rights activists.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Free Saudi Activists Coalition is comprised of seven organisations: Americans for Human Rights and Democracy in Bahrain, CIVICUS, Equality Now, Gulf Centre for Human Rights, International Service for Human Rights, WHRD-MENA, and Women's March Global. The Coalition was formed in May 2018 after the first round of arrests of Saudi Women Human Rights Activists and other WHRDs.

We wish to acknowledge and thank organisations with whom we have collaborated in our continued efforts to advocate for the immediate and unconditional release of all Saudi WHRDs:

Lifeline CSO Fund for Embattled CSOs

OMCT

FIDH

Human Rights Watch

PEN America

ALQST

MENA Rights Group

HRC-net

Amnesty International





FREE SAUDI ACTIVISTS

