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Repression Under Saudi Crown Prince Tarnishes Reforms

Important social reforms enacted under Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman have been accompanied by deepening repression and abusive practices meant to silence dissidents and critics, Human Rights Watch said in a report released today.

Saudi Crown Prince and Defence Minister Mohammed bin Salman arrives to attend the first meeting of the defense ministers and officials of the 41-member Saudi-led Muslim counter-terrorism alliance in the capital Riyadh on November 26, 2017. 2017 Fayez Nureldine/AFP/Getty Images

Important social reforms enacted under Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman have been accompanied by deepening repression and abusive practices meant to silence dissidents and critics, Human Rights Watch said in a report released today.

With young Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salmans rise to power, he promised an embrace of social and economic reform. He spoke of making our country more open and tolerant and promised that he would address the things that hold back our progress, such as the ban on women driving. But all I see now is the recent wave of arrests.

On January 23, 2015, Saudi Arabias 90-year-old King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud died following a protracted illness. The country faced a deteriorating economy that was overly reliant on high oil prices and unable to meet the employment and livelihood demands of Saudi Arabias growing youth population. King Abdullahs successor, Salman bin Abdulaziz, a half-brother, immediately set out to address the countrys economic plight, appointing his then 29-year-old son Mohammed as the head of the newly established Council of Economic and Development Affairs and the Minister of Defense.

Mohammed bin Salman (known by his initials MBS), a relatively unknown and junior prince prior to his fathers accession to the throne, quickly became the face of Saudi Arabias efforts to reform the countrys economy. In April 2016 he launched Vision 2030, an ambitious government road map for economic and developmental growth that aims to reduce the countrys dependence on oil.

The following year, in June 2017, King Salman elevated his son to crown prince, making him next in line to the Saudi throne and de facto day-to-day ruler of the country. Positive changes for women and youth, combined with a major push for foreign direct investment into the worlds largest oil producing country and lavishly funded public relations efforts helped to bolster a positive image for the crown prince on the international political scene. During visits to the United Kingdom and United States in March 2018, Prince Mohammed was lauded by officials, businesspeople, and celebrities alike.

Behind the glamor and pomp of Prince Mohammeds newfound fame abroad and advancements for Saudi women and youth, however, lay a darker reality, as the Saudi authorities moved to sideline anyone in Saudi Arabia who could stand in the way of his political ascension. In the summer of 2017, around the time of his promotion to crown prince, authorities purged former security and intelligence officials and quietly reorganized the countrys prosecution service and security apparatus, the primary tools of Saudi repression, and placed them directly under the royal courts oversight. With the security apparatus completely under royal court control, the authorities then launched a series of arrest campaigns, targeting dozens of critics and potential critics of Saudi government policies. These arrest waves targeted prominent clerics, public intellectuals, academics, and human rights activists in September 2017, leading businesspeople and royal family members accused of corruption in November 2017, and the countrys most prominent womens rights advocates beginning in May 2018. The arrests waves were often accompanied by defamation and slander of those arrested in the countrys progovernment media.

Detaining citizens for peaceful criticism of the governments policies or human rights advocacy is not a new phenomenon in Saudi Arabia, but what has made the post-2017 arrest waves notable and different, however, is the sheer number and range of individuals targeted over a short period of time as well as the introduction of new repressive practices not seen under previous Saudi leadership.

These new tactics include cases of holding detainees at unofficial places of detention, such as the detention of so-called corruption detainees at the five-star Ritz-Carlton hotel in Riyadh from late 2017 into early 2018, as well as the detention of prominent womens rights activists at a hotel or guesthouse during the summer of 2018. While in unofficial detention centers, allegations have emerged that torture and mistreatment of detainees were rampant. For example, in March 12, 2018 the *New York Times* reported that 17 Ritz-Carlton detainees required hospitalization for physical abuse, including one man who later died in custody. In addition, in late 2018 Human Rights Watch received credible information from informed sources that authorities had tortured four prominent Saudi women activists while in an unofficial detention center, including by administering electric shocks, whipping the women on their thighs, forcible hugging and kissing, and groping.

Abusive practices also have included long-term arbitrary detention over two years without charge, trial, or any clear legal process. For example, some of the so-called corruption detainees arrested in late 2017 remain at this writing in detention without charge or trial, including Turki bin Abdullah, the son of the late King Abdullah and former governor of Riyadh, Adel al-Fakih, a former minister, and Bakr Binladin, a construction mogul.

Human Rights Watch identified approximately **70** people detained or arrested, including:

Salman al-Awda

Cleric, on trial for alleged Muslim Brotherhood membership facing death penalty

Essam al-Zamil

Economist, on trial for alleged Muslim Brotherhood membership

Hassan Farhan al-Maliki

Religious thinker, on trial for religious ideas facing death penalty

Human Rights Watch identified approximately **8** people detained or arrested

Human Rights Watch identified approximately **40** people detained or arrested, including:

Alwaleed bin Talal

Businessman, released after turning over assets

Miteb bin Abdullah

Former minister, released after turning over assets

Turki bin Abdullah

Former Riyadh governor, in detention without charge or trial

Human Rights Watch identified approximately **2** people detained or arrested

Human Rights Watch identified approximately **5** people detained or arrested

Human Rights Watch identified approximately **3** people detained or arrested

Human Rights Watch identified approximately **16** people detained or arrested, including:

Loujain al-Hathloul

Human rights activist, jailed and on trial for her activism, including:

Aziza Yousef

Human rights activist, on trial for her activism

Eman al-Nafjan

Human rights activist, on trial for her activism

Human Rights Watch identified approximately 7 people detained or arrested

Human Rights Watch identified approximately 13 people detained or arrested

Samar Badawi

Human rights activist, jailed and on trial for her activism

Nassima al-Sadah

Human rights activist, jailed and on trial for her activism

Human Rights Watch identified approximately 7 people detained or arrested

Human Rights Watch identified approximately 5 people detained or arrested

Human Rights Watch identified approximately 11 people detained or arrested

Human Rights Watch identified approximately 1 person detained or arrested

Human Rights Watch identified approximately 1 person detained or arrested

Human Rights Watch identified approximately 13 people detained or arrested

Salah al-Haidar

Writer and activist

Human Rights Watch identified approximately 1 person detained or arrested

Human Rights Watch identified approximately 4 people detained or arrested

Authorities also targeted family members of prominent Saudi dissidents and activists, including by imposing arbitrary travel bans. Omar Abdulaziz, a Canada-based Saudi dissident, said that Saudi authorities detained his two brothers in August 2018 in an effort to silence his online activism.

Other abusive practices have included extorting financial assets of detainees in exchange for their release outside of any legal process and seeking the death penalty against detainees for acts that do not resemble recognizable crimes. For example, Saudi prosecutors are currently seeking the death penalty against reformist religious thinker Hassan Farhan al-Maliki on vague charges relating to the expression of his peaceful religious ideas, as well as against the widely known cleric Salman al-Awda on charges stemming solely from his peaceful political statements, associations, and positions. Both men were detained during the September 2017 crackdown.

Saudi Arabia has reportedly used commercially available surveillance technologies to hack into the online accounts of government critics and dissidents. Citizen Lab, an academic research center based in Canada, concluded with high confidence that in 2018 a Saudi activists mobile phone was infected with spyware, and other activists have announced that they were targeted with the same spyware.

Mohammed bin Salman, who was appointed defense minister in January 2015, has also ultimate responsibility for Saudi Arabias abusive tactics in its four-year-old military intervention in Yemen. The Saudi-led coalition which has been conducting military operations against Houthi forces in Yemen, has imposed an aerial and naval blockade and restricted the flow of life-saving goods, exacerbating an existing humanitarian crisis. Saudi-led coalition aircraft have carried out apparently unlawful attacks that hit Yemeni markets, hospitals, schools, funerals, and even a school bus filled with children.

The repressive side of MBSs domestic record, however, was not given the international scrutiny it deserved until October 2018, when the violent murder of Saudi journalist and *Washington Post* columnist Jamal Khashoggi at Saudi Arabias Istanbul consulate shocked global opinion and led to a broader examination of the human rights situation in Saudi Arabia.

There was massive global media coverage of Khashoggis death, especially as it became clear that Saudi state agents perpetrated his murder. This was accompanied by unprecedented condemnation of Saudi abuses. Dozens of business leaders and officials pulled out of Saudi Arabias Future Investment Initiative Forum, otherwise known as Davos in the desert, which took place in Riyadh in late October 2018. On November 15, 2018, the United States imposed sanctions, including travel bans and asset freezes, on 17 Saudis in connection with their alleged role in the murder.

Countries and world leaders also called attention to the continuing arbitrary detention of public dissidents and activists, particularly detained womens rights advocates. On February 14, 2019, for example, the European Parliament adopted a resolution calling on Saudi Arabia to immediately and unconditionally release womens rights defenders and all human rights defenders, lawyers, journalists and other prisoners of conscience detained and sentenced merely for exercising their right to freedom of expression and for their peaceful human rights work. The resolution also called for an EU-wide ban on export of surveillance systems, reiterated that arms sales to Saudi Arabia contravene the EUs common position on arms exports, and called for restricted measures against Saudi Arabia in response to breaches of human rights, including asset freezes and visa bans.

On March 7, 2019, 36 countries at the United Nations Human Rights Council issued the first ever joint statement on Saudi human rights abuses, calling on Saudi Arabia to release all individuals, including Loujain al-Hathloul, Eman al-Nafjan, Aziza al-Yousef, Nassima al-Sadah, Samar Badawi, Nouf Abdelaziz, Hatoun al-Fassi, Mohammed AlBajadi, Amal Al-Harbi, and Shadan al-Anezi, detained for exercising their fundamental freedoms.

In February 2019, a bipartisan group of US Congressional representatives led by Congresswoman Lois Frankel issued a resolution calling on Saudi Arabia to immediately and unconditionally release jailed Saudi womens rights activists and hold those responsible for abuses accountable. A bipartisan group of US Senators led by Senator Marco Rubio introduced a similar resolution in the US Senate. Other congressional bills and resolutions pushing for Saudi government accountability for the Khashoggi murder remain under consideration at the time of writing.

Despite this global condemnation of Saudi Arabias escalating domestic repression, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has continued to enjoy the unwavering support of several key world leaders, including US President Donald Trump. On November 6, 2017, following Saudi Arabias corruption arrests, Trump tweeted his support, writing, I have great confidence in King Salman and the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, they know exactly what they are doing.... Some of those they are harshly treating have been milking their country for years! On November 20, 2018, during a period of widespread criticism over the Khashoggi murder, the Trump administration issued a statement that began with the phrase [t]he world a dangerous place! and referred to Jamal Khashoggi as an enemy of the state and member of the Muslim Brotherhood. The statement went on to argue that the US should continue its arms sales to Saudi Arabia because cancelling them would mean that Russia and China would be the enormous beneficiaries.

In mid-2019, while dozens of dissidents remained on trial and in prison, and with no clear accountability for allegations of torture of detainees or the murder of Khashoggi, Saudi authorities resumed efforts to improve the countrys reputation and shift the international narrative away from the Khashoggi murder, in part by announcing major womens rights reforms. In June 2018, just weeks after the detentions of the countrys leading womens rights advocates, Saudi authorities lifted the ban on women driving. In late July 2019, Saudi Arabia announced that Saudi women over 21 will be able to obtain passports without the approval of a male relative, register births of their children, and benefit from new protections against employment discrimination. In early August, Saudi Arabia announced further changes to regulations allowing women over 21 to travel abroad freely without permission of a male guardian.

Despite major advances for women, ongoing arbitrary and abusive practices against dissidents and activists since mid-2017 and total lack of accountability demonstrate that the rule of law in Saudi Arabia remains weak and can be undermined at will by the countrys political leadership. It remains a criminal offense under the Saudi Arabias 2017 counterterrorism law to criticize the king or crown prince in a manner that brings religion or justice into disrepute punishable by five to ten years in prison.

In order to demonstrate that Saudi Arabia is truly reforming, King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman should introduce new reforms to ensure that Saudi citizens enjoy basic human rights, including freedoms of expression, association, and assembly, as well as an independent judiciary and due process of law. The authorities can signal this commitment immediately by releasing from detention all detainees detained arbitrarily or on charges based solely on their peaceful ideas or expression, dropping all charges that do not resemble recognizable crimes against dissidents on trial, and providing accountability for perpetrators of abuses such as torture or arbitrary punishments.

Saudi authorities have not granted Human Rights Watch access to freely conduct in-country research since a research mission to the country in 2006. Human Rights Watch staff have visited Saudi Arabia six times since 2006, but most of these visits remained tightly circumscribed.

The report is based on telephone interviews with Saudi activists and dissidents since 2017, government statements, and court documents, as well as exhaustive reviews of Saudi local media outlets and social media. To protect those we interviewed from retaliation, we have withheld names or used pseudonyms for interviewees, unless they indicated a willingness to be named. Researchers informed all interviewees of the purpose of the interview and the ways in which the data would be used, and none of the interviewees received financial or other incentives for speaking with Human Rights Watch.

Human Rights Watch compiled lists of detainees in Chapter IV from available evidence including interviews with Saudi human rights activists, official statements, and media reports. The lists are not exhaustive. Unless otherwise indicated, the latest available information indicates that individuals listed remain in detention.

On October 21, Human Rights Watch sent a letter to the Saudi government outlining the general conclusions of our research. As of early November, Saudi authorities had not replied to Human Rights Watch.

Since the establishment of the modern-day Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932 the country has been ruled as an absolute monarchy, first by its founder Abdulaziz Al Saud and then, following his death, by a succession of his sons. While maintaining absolute power over decision making, Saudi leaders historically exercised power in dialogue with informal yet powerful interest groups which maintained the ability to influence decisions. These groups included the countrys conservative Sunni religious establishment of state-affiliated and independent clerics, other members of the royal family, the security services, and influential members of the Saudi business community.^[1]

The emergence of Mohammed bin Salman in early 2015 began to alter the status quo. Authorities moved to systematically curtail the influence of these groups and their ability to dictate decisions. In April 2016, Saudi Arabias Council of Ministers removed the powers of arrest from the countrys abusive religious police. In late 2017, as part of a sweeping crackdown on Saudi dissidents, authorities arrested prominent independent clerics critical of government policies.^[2] In late 2017, authorities also rounded up tens of prominent members of the royal family, current and former government officials, and members of the business community as a part of a campaign against corruption.^[3]

Beyond arrests, following his appointment as crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman and his father also meticulously moved to restructure the countrys traditional tools of repression, the internal security forces and the prosecution service, removing them from the jurisdiction of the interior ministry and placing them directly under the king, giving the royal court sole oversight over the agencies that conduct arrests and prosecutions.^[4] Since his appointment as defense minister in 2015, Mohammed bin Salman has maintained control of the Saudi military. In November 2017 King Salman and Mohammed bin Salman removed control of the Saudi National Guard, an independent military force, from the late King Abdullahs son Mutaib and jailed him for alleged corruption, effectively bringing all branches of the Saudi armed forces under royal court control.^[5]

When confronted in an interview with Bloomberg in October 2018 about Saudi Arabias mass arrests, Mohammed bin Salman justified them as necessary for enacting reforms in Saudi Arabia, stating:

When Salman bin Abdulaziz acceded to the Saudi throne in January 2015, Prince Mohammed, the first son from his third marriage, was a relative unknown. Unlike some of his older brothers, who included Sultan bin Salman, the first Arab and Muslim ever to fly in outer space, or Abdulaziz bin Salman, a major figure in Saudi Arabias oil industry, Prince Mohammed did not have a significant public profile prior to 2015 nor had he studied outside the country like many prominent royal family members.^[7] Rather, he had quietly served his father, primarily as an advisor to Salman while he was Minister of Defense and governor of Riyadh. According to Karen Elliott House, Prince Mohammed became close to his father by remaining by his side while he grieved the deaths of his eldest and third eldest sons in 2001 and 2002 respectively, both from heart disease.^[8]

Mohammed bin Salman burst onto the international arena in January 2015 when his father, immediately after becoming king, appointed him defense minister (Salmans former position).^[9] As defense minister he quickly

established himself as less cautious than his predecessors, facilitating the launch of major military operations in Yemen in March 2015 by a coalition of countries. The military campaign aimed to roll back the advances of the Ansar Allah militant group (known as the Houthis), a Zaydi Shia group which had taken over most of Yemen, including the capital Sanaa, and expelled the countrys internationally-recognized government headed by President Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi.

When King Salman took the throne, he promoted Mohammed bin Nayef, Mohammed bin Salmans cousin and former interior minister who successfully led Saudi Arabias counter-insurgency efforts after 2004, as deputy crown prince behind Crown Prince Muqrin, who is Mohammed bin Salmans uncle. Within three months, however, King Salman altered the line of succession, sacking Muqrin and elevating Mohammed bin Nayef to crown prince and Mohammed bin Salman to deputy crown prince.^[10]

Between April 2015 and June 2017, the division of power between Mohammed bin Salman and Mohammed bin Nayef was clear, with Mohammed bin Salman in control of the countrys economy and military, and Mohammed bin Nayef in control of domestic security affairs.

On June 17, 2017, however, the first major crack in the fragile arrangement appeared when King Salman issued a royal decree removing Othman al-Muhrij from his position as director of the countrys Public Security Directorate (police), a major agency within the Interior Ministry.^[11] The same day, he also issued a royal decree severing the Bureau of Investigation and Prosecution (BIP) from the Interior Ministry and re-establishing it as the Public Prosecution, an independent entity reporting directly to the king and headed by a new head prosecution official called the Attorney General. The royal decreed that the change was in [accordance] with the rules and principles of many countries of the world, and based on the necessity of separation between executive authority in the state and the bureau and its work since it is part of the judicial authority.^[12]

Show [Before Summer 2017](#) or [After Summer 2017](#)

The Saudi prosecution service is a major tool of Saudi repression and has been used to terrorize peaceful Saudi dissidents since 1988 through various means, including harassment, endless summonses for interrogation, arbitrary detention, and prosecution in blatantly unfair trials on spurious charges.^[13] These practices accelerated and increased following the 2017 reorganization.

On June 21, within days of removing the prosecution service from Mohammed bin Nayefs control, King Salman acted decisively by stripping him of all his official positions and appointing his son Mohammed bin Salman crown prince and presumptive future king.^[14] To secure his elevation, Mohammed bin Salman reportedly garnered all but 3 votes in the countrys allegiance council, which decides on succession issues and is made up of 34 royal family members who are sons or represent the families of sons of Saudi Arabias founding King Abdulaziz.^[15]

Citing US intelligence officials, the *New York Times* reported on June 28, 2017 that Mohammed bin Nayef had not only been deposed but also placed under house arrest at his Jeddah palace and prevented from leaving the country.^[16] An informed source told Human Rights Watch that in addition to placing Mohammed bin Nayef under house arrest, authorities also purged many officials loyal to him from the security apparatus, including by detaining two high-level Interior Ministry officials. Another security official close to Mohammed bin Nayef who served as Saudi Arabias liaison to western intelligence agencies fled the country.^[17] The source said that authorities banned immediate family members of Mohammed bin Nayef and these officials from travel and froze their bank accounts and assets.^[18] The sidelining of Mohammed bin Nayef and his loyalists effectively removed the most serious royal challenger to Mohammed bin Salman.

For the remainder of 2017, King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammed moved against other individuals who could potentially curb their power, culminating in the establishment of an anticorruption committee headed by the crown prince which carried out so-called corruption arrests on November 4, 2017, when powerful figures within the royal family and influential Saudis such as Prince Alwaleed bin Talal, a prominent businessman, Abdulaziz bin Fahd, a former cabinet member, Turki bin Abdullah, a former governor of Riyadh, Fahd bin Abdullah, a former defense minister, and Mutaib bin Abdullah, then-Minister of National Guard, and at least nine other princes were detained, stripped of their positions, and forced to hand over financial assets in exchange for their freedom.^[19] The so-called corruption arrests appeared to especially target the sons of the late King Abdullah. Some royal detainees, including Turki bin Abdullah, remain in detention without charge at the time of writing.

In order to cement his position as crown prince, beginning in mid-2017 King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammed sought to overhaul the security infrastructure of the state and effectively downgrade the previously powerful role of interior minister.

In addition to placing the prosecution service under the purview of the royal court, King Salman also created a new agency, the Presidency of State Security, which absorbed the intelligence and counterterrorism functions formerly held by the Interior Ministry. The new agency contains the General Directorate of Investigation (known as *Mabahith*, the notorious domestic security agency) as well as Saudi Arabias special counterterrorism forces, which is headed by longtime Interior Ministry official Abdulaziz bin Mohammed al-Howairini. Commenting on the change, *Arab News* said, after the rise of the terror threat [in the early 2000s], the Interior Ministry concentrated much of its efforts on fighting this scourge. This led to the addition of a large number of responsibilities, which affected the ministrys other services such as police, traffic and the passport department.^[20]

Following the reduction of responsibilities of the Interior Ministry, King Salman appointed a new minister, Prince Abdulaziz bin Saud, then 34, a relative of Mohammed bin Salman and son of the governor of Saudi Arabias Eastern Province.^[21] The appointment of Prince Abdulaziz kept the interior minister portfolio with the Nayef faction of the royal family, which has held the position nearly continuously since 1975, but the prestige and power of the position had been drastically reduced.

The centralization of power also extended to the military, whereby in November 2017 King Salman and Mohammed bin Salman removed control of the Saudi National Guard, an independent military force, from the late King Abdullahs son Mutaib and jailed him for alleged corruption, effectively bringing all branches of the Saudi armed forces under the control of the royal court.^[22]

Since his appointment as crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman has chaired both of the Saudi Council of Ministers subcommittees, putting him in charge of both economic affairs as well as political and security affairs.

Mohammed bin Salmans consolidation of power and mass arrests, which he labelled a small price in comparison with other movements around the world, allowed him to propose his own solutions to Saudi Arabias burgeoning economic crisis without hindrance or obstruction from Saudi Arabias traditional interest groups.

When King Abdullah died in January 2015, the country faced a major economic crisis as global oil prices were plummeting from a high of US\$115 per barrel in June 2014 to \$35 per barrel in February 2016, wiping out 77 to 88 percent of the countrys income.^[23] In September 2014, the International Monetary Fund warned that without cuts to government spending Saudi Arabia would face a budget deficit in 2015 and the prospect of spending down its cash reserves.^[24] The IMFs prediction proved accurate in late 2015 Saudi Arabia announced a budget deficit of 367 billion riyals (\$97.9 billion).^[25] Furthermore, despite years of policies aimed at overhauling the Saudi private sector to ensure more employment opportunities for Saudi citizens as opposed to foreign migrant workers, the Saudi youth unemployment rate in 2014 and 2015 remained around 30 percent, a worrying statistic given that two thirds of the Saudi population is under 30 years old.^[26] In late 2015 a Brookings Institution op-ed warned that Saudi Arabia faces an economic time bomb, which, if not defused, will have severe and possibly irreversible effects both nationally and internationally.^[27]

Following his appointment by his father to head the economic council, Prince Mohammed bin Salman quickly became the face of Saudi Arabias efforts to counter its economic woes and overhaul the countrys economy to make it less susceptible to oil price fluctuations. By early 2016, in response to a question from the Economist on whether Saudi Arabia was facing an economic crisis, Prince Mohammed stated as follows:

In April 2016, Mohammad bin Salman made good on his promise by announcing the countrys signature economic reform plan, Vision 2030, a sweeping development program aimed at diversifying the economy and creating a global investment powerhouse.^[29] The plan lays out major strategic objectives for economic and social change accompanied by a host of programs to address issues such as housing, quality of life, public investment, financial sector development, and improving government performance, each with specified objectives and five-year milestones.^[30]

Under Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia has also invested heavily in creating a local entertainment industry. In May 2016, authorities created the General Entertainment Authority, a new agency with plans to invest billions of dollars in the areas of music, entertainment, sports, art, and film, among others.^[31] In 2018, authorities allowed movie theaters to open, with AMC, the US movie theatre chain, opening the first movie theater in Saudi Arabia in 35 years in Riyadh. In 2019 Saudi Arabia announced plans to invest \$35 billion into building 2,500 movie screens across the country by 2020.^[32] At the time of writing Saudi Arabia had hosted concerts major international artists such as Mariah Carey, Yanni, Andrea Bocelli, Janet Jackson, and 50 Cent.^[33] The establishment of an entertainment industry has also provoked controversies, however, with the countrys Grand Mufti denouncing public entertainment and movie theaters in early 2017, the sacking of the General Entertainment Authoritys chairman in June 2018 following a controversial Russian circus performance in Riyadh featuring women wearing tight clothing, and rapper Nicki Minaj pulling out of the July 2019 Jeddah World Fest following pressure from human rights groups.^[34]

The signature piece of Prince Mohammeds economic overhaul plan is to generate revenue through an initial public offering (IPO) of a limited percentage of the countrys massive state oil company, Saudi Aramco, on an international stock exchange. While New York, London, and Hong Kong were initially considered as venues for the IPO, Reuters reported on October 29 that Saudi authorities would announce the start of the IPO in early November 2019 and float a one to two percent stake of the company on Saudi Arabias *Tadawul* stock exchange.^[35]

Prince Mohammeds efforts to attract international investment were temporarily hindered by the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in October 2018, with many international investors, financiers, and business leaders canceling their participation in Saudi Arabias Future Investment Initiative forum in late October 2018 as well as investors pulling their money out of the Saudi stock market.^[36] By April 2019, however the *Financial Times* and the *New York Times* reported that many businesses had returned to invest in Saudi Arabia.^[37] Nevertheless, whether Saudi Arabia can obtain enough capital through international investment to overhaul the countrys economy and meet the needs of Saudi Arabias rapidly growing society remains to be seen.

Saudi Arabias arrest campaigns since 2017 are notable for both the number of individuals targeted over a short period of time and the introduction of new ad hoc abusive practices that represent a significant deterioration in a country where the rule of law was already tenuous. These practices include the use of unofficial places of detention, extorting individuals to hand over assets or make statements in return for their release, and seeking the death penalty for crimes based on individuals peaceful speech and activities, among others.

Some of the ad hoc and abusive practices introduced since 2017 are associated with Mohammed bin Salmans former advisor, Saud al-Qahtani, whom King Salman fired in October 2018 for his alleged role in the murder of Jamal Khashoggi.^[38] Citing US intelligence sources, the *New York Times* reported that the crown prince authorized a secret campaign against Saudi dissidents over a year before Khashoggis murder, empowering his then-advisor, al-Qahtani, to oversee a team dubbed the Rapid Intervention Group, which conducted at least a dozen operations prior to the targeting of Khashoggi in October 2018.^[39] One of the operations the report cites is the targeting of Saudi womens rights activists, and the timeline of the groups formation corresponds roughly with the beginning of the arrest campaigns in September 2017.^[40] In mid-August 2017, just before the arrests began, al-Qahtani tweeted the following comment: Do you think that I make things up with guidance? I am a trustworthy employee who carries out the orders of my masters the king and crown prince.^[41]

Despite a Public Prosecution statement alleging that al-Qahtani was involved in the Khashoggi affair, he is reportedly not one of the 11 individuals on trial for the murder, and the *Wall Street Journal* reported in February 2019 that al-Qahtani continues to serve as an informal advisor to Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.^[42] In October 2019, Saudi ambassador to the United Kingdom Khalid bin Bandar stated that al-Qahtani remains under investigation and in his home, but that no concrete evidence has emerged regarding his involvement in the murder.^[43]

Saudi Arabia has a long, notorious record of holding criminal suspects without charge or trial for months and even years. In May 2018, for example, Human Rights Watch analyzed data from a public online Saudi Interior Ministry prisoner database, which revealed that authorities at that time had detained 2,305 people who are under investigation for more than six months without referring them to a judge, while 1,875 were detained for more than a year and 251 for over three years while under investigation.^[44]

Saudi Arabias Law of Criminal Procedure provides that a person may be detained without charge for a maximum of five days, renewable up to six months by an order of the Bureau of Investigation and Prosecution (now Public Prosecution). After six months, the law requires that a detainee be directly transferred to the competent court or be released.^[45]

Despite Saudi law, however, many individuals targeted in arrest campaigns since 2017 were held up to a year without charge, and the legal status of others remains unclear, particularly among some of those arrested in the November 2017 corruption crackdown. Those who remain in detention without clear legal status at this writing include Prince Turki bin Abdullah, the former governor of Riyadh and son of the late King Abdullah; Prince Turkiis associate Faisal al-Jarba; Prince Salman bin Abdulaziz bin Salman and his father, Prince Abdulaziz bin Salman bin Mohammed; a former planning minister, Adel al-Fakieh; and a construction mogul, Bakr Binladin.^[46]

An informed source told Human Rights Watch that Prince Salman bin Abdulaziz and his father, both businessmen, have remained in detention without charge or trial since their arrests in January 2018. The source said that Prince Salman believes he was detained in retaliation for his advocacy on behalf of his detained family members after the November arrests. To the sources knowledge, the authorities did not freeze Prince Salman bin Abdulaziz or his fathers assets or ask for financial settlements. They are in al-Hair prison, south of Riyadh. Prince Salman bin Abdulaziz is married to a daughter of King Abdullah.^[47]

Another informed source told Human Rights Watch that Faisal al-Jarba, a confidant of Prince Turki bin Abdullah, remains in detention without charge.^[48] The *Washington Post* reported that in June, the Jordanian

authorities had detained al-Jarbain Amman, where he had fled to seek safety, and eventually drove him to the Saudi border and handed him over to Saudi authorities. Prince Turki himself also remains in detention without charge, the source said.[\[49\]](#)

Authorities also detained and held a Saudi American medical doctor and popular television host, Walid al-Fitaihi, for 21 months without charge or trial. A family member told Human Rights Watch that authorities initially held al-Fitaihi in the Ritz-Carlton for two months before transferring him to al-Hair prison south of Riyadh.[\[50\]](#) In late January 2019 the authorities transferred him again to Dhahban prison north of Jeddah. The family member said that in early March 2019 Saudi authorities raided the family's home in Jeddah following a *New York Times* story alleging that al-Fitaihi was mistreated in detention.[\[51\]](#) He said that 15-16 men came to the house, bringing along al-Fitaihi himself wearing arm and leg shackles, and took all the computers and mobile phones in the house. The family member said he did not know why al-Fitaihi had been targeted for arrest. On August 1, 2019, Saudi authorities released al-Fitaihi pending the outcome of his trial.[\[52\]](#)

Those detained in the September 2017 arrest wave, including Salman al-Awda, Hassan Farhan al-Maliki, Ali al-Omari, and Awad al-Qarni, remained in detention without trial for nearly a year before authorities finally began to charge them and put them on trial in September 2018. Nevertheless, some trials have been marred by unexplained delays and postponements, including the trial of Salman al-Awda. Authorities took al-Awda to court for a scheduled hearing on July 28, 2019, but after waiting five hours the court abruptly postponed the hearing until November without explanation. Authorities then suddenly held a series of hearings in early October and scheduled the final hearing for October 10, but on October 10 they postponed the final hearing without explanation.[\[53\]](#)

Similarly, for Saudi women's rights activists detained beginning in May 2018, authorities held them for 10 months before filing charges.[\[54\]](#) After three or four trial sessions in March and April, however, Saudi authorities do not appear to have convened any substantive hearings in their cases, for which there has been no explanation.[\[55\]](#) At the time of writing most of the women are free but banned from travel abroad pending the outcomes of their trials, but others, including Loujain al-Hathloul, Samar Badawi, Nouf Abdulaziz, and Nassima al-Sadah, remain in detention.

Extended detention without charge or trial or without an appearance before a judge is arbitrary and violates both Saudi law and international human rights standards.

The United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention has determined that detention is arbitrary when the detaining authority fails to observe, wholly or in part, the norms related to the right to due process, including for a prompt hearing before a judge following the initial detention.[\[56\]](#) Principle 11 of the UN Body of Principles for the Protection of All Persons under Any Form of Detention or Imprisonment states that a detainee must be given an effective opportunity to be heard promptly by a judicial or other authority, and that a judicial or other authority should be empowered to review the decision to continue detention.[\[57\]](#)

The Arab Charter on Human Rights, which Saudi Arabia ratified in 2009, also guarantees the right of anyone arrested or detained on a criminal charge to be brought promptly before a judge or other officer of the law, and to have a trial within a reasonable time or be released. The charter says that, Pre-trial detention shall in no case be the general rule.[\[58\]](#)

In flagrant violation of Saudi law and international standards, Saudi authorities held some detainees in unofficial places of detention. The most high-profile incident was the detention of dozens of leading businesspeople, members of the royal family, and current and former government officials in Riyadh's Ritz-Carlton hotel between November 2017 and February 2018.[\[59\]](#) In January 2018, a spokesperson from Marriott, which owns the Ritz-Carlton brand, said, The hotel is operating under the directive of local authorities and not as a traditional hotel for the time being.[\[60\]](#)

In addition, Saudi women activists detained beginning in May 2018 say that most of their mistreatment took place at an unofficial detention facility they called a hotel between May and August, after which they were moved to Dhahban prison. One source indicated that the women were taken to a room called an officers' guesthouse, but the location of this room is unclear.[\[61\]](#) A family member of Loujain al-Hathloul told the *New York Times* that the women were held in what appeared to be an unused palace in Jeddah.[\[62\]](#)

Holding detainees at unofficial detention centers violates international standards. The United Nations Human Rights Committee, in its general comment on article 7 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), stated that provisions should be made for detainees to be held in places officially recognized as places of detention and for their names and places of detention, as well as for the names of persons responsible for their detention, to be kept in registers readily available and accessible to those concerned, including relatives and friends.[\[63\]](#)

After detaining over 300 leading businesspeople, royal family members, and current and former government officials at Riyadh's Ritz-Carlton hotel in November 2017, Saudi authorities reportedly pressured them to hand over assets to the state in return for their release outside of any clear or recognizable legal process.[\[64\]](#)

Many reportedly made deals. Alwaleed al-Ibrahim, for example, the head of the MBC Group, reportedly turned over the control of the company to Saudi authorities and was released in January 2018.[\[65\]](#) In March 2019, Reuters reported that Bakr Binladin and two of his brothers detained in the Ritz-Carlton were forced to sell a significant percentage of the Binladin Group construction company to *Istidama*, a subsidiary of the Saudi Finance Ministry, and all were removed from the restructured company's board.[\[66\]](#) Authorities released prominent businessman Prince Alwaleed bin Talal in January 2018 after he reached a financial settlement with Saudi authorities but remained in control of his company. He called his arrest a misunderstanding.[\[67\]](#) Likewise, authorities released prominent businessmen Amr Dabbagh and Mohammed al-Amoudi in January 2019 after they reportedly made deals, though the terms have not been made public.[\[68\]](#)

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.[\[69\]](#)

In addition to financial settlements, informed sources told Human Rights Watch that Saudi authorities also offered to release two prominent women's rights activists in mid-2019 if they went on television to refute allegations that authorities had tortured them in detention. In August 2019, family members of Loujain al-Hathloul said that authorities had recently offered her release and an end to her trial if she signed a statement refuting the allegations of torture, which she initially agreed to do, but refused the offer after the authorities said she must make the statement on camera.[\[70\]](#) An informed source told Human Rights Watch that a high-level official with the Presidency of State Security visited another detained woman activist in July or August and offered to release her and provide financial compensation if she refuted the torture allegations on television.[\[71\]](#)

In addition to directly targeting Saudi citizens for arrest since September 2017, in some cases authorities have also punished their family members by imposing arbitrary bans on travel outside the country or freezing their assets and access to government services.

A family member of the detained cleric Salman al-Awda told Human Rights Watch that Saudi authorities imposed arbitrary travel bans on 17 members of his immediate family following the arrest. He said that the family only found out about the bans when another family member attempted to leave the country and was refused. He said the immigration officer told his family member that the royal court itself had imposed the travel bans for unspecified reasons.[\[72\]](#)

In addition, a family member of detained doctor Walid al-Fitaihi, who has US as well as Saudi nationality, told Human Rights Watch that following al-Fitaihi's arrest Saudi authorities arbitrarily imposed travel bans on all members of al-Fitaihi's immediate family, all of whom are also US citizens. He said that he went to the airport to attempt to travel out of the country several times in 2018 but was stopped each time after a fingerprint scan at the immigration checkpoint. Officials there did not give him an explanation for the ban.[\[73\]](#)

A source close to a former Saudi intelligence official purged alongside Mohammed bin Nayef told Human Rights Watch that Saudi authorities banned two of his children from travel abroad and froze all of their financial assets inside the country.[\[74\]](#) He also said that he has spoken with former detainees who were permitted to travel abroad but only on condition that they leave a close family member behind as collateral to ensure their return.[\[75\]](#)

Saudi human rights activists told Human Rights Watch that authorities also imposed arbitrary travel bans on family members of prominent women's rights activists following their detentions in May 2018.[\[76\]](#)

In arbitrarily imposing the travel bans on family members of detainees, the Ministry of Interior appears to have broken Saudi law. Aside from a judicial ruling by a court, the interior minister may impose bans for defined reasons related to security and for a known period and must notify those banned within one week of the ban.[\[77\]](#) For family members of detainees, in no case did the ministry inform those on whom they imposed travel bans of the bans themselves or the specific reasons for subjecting them to the bans.

Arbitrary travel bans violate international human rights law which guarantees everyone the right to leave any country, including their own, and to return to their country.[\[78\]](#)

Saudi Arabia carries out more executions per year than all but a few countries. Since 2014, Saudi Arabia has executed over 860 individuals, mostly for murder, violent acts, and nonviolent drug crimes.[\[79\]](#) Outside of those executed for drug crimes, capital trials involved accusations of acts of violence in nearly all cases. In 2018, however, Saudi prosecutors began seeking the death penalty against individuals solely based on their peaceful political affiliations or ideas.

Those currently facing capital trials absent any allegation of violence include the prominent cleric Salman al-Awda. In September 2018, local Saudi media outlets printed the first five of al-Awda's charges, and Human Rights Watch reviewed the others from a copy of the courts charge sheet it obtained.[\[80\]](#) The initial charges are mostly related to his alleged ties to the Muslim Brotherhood and other organizations supposedly connected to it. One such organization listed in the charge sheet, the International Union of Muslim Scholars, was not named as a terrorist organization by Saudi authorities until November 20, 2018, over two months after al-Awda's arrest.[\[81\]](#)

The first charge against al-Awda reads:

Multiple charges relate to his public solidarity with imprisoned dissidents, opposing the Saudi-led isolation of Qatar in mid-2017, and alleged ties to the Qatari government. Other charges include having a suspicious relationship with the former Gaddafi government in Libya, publicly opposing Saudi Arabia's hosting of former Tunisian president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, mocking governmental achievements, and offending patriotism and loyalty to the government and the country.[\[83\]](#)

Another detainee against whom Saudi authorities are seeking the death penalty is Hassan Farhan al-Maliki, a reformist religious thinker. Human Rights Watch reviewed al-Maliki's charge sheet, which consists of 14 charges, nearly all with no resemblance to recognized crimes.[\[84\]](#) The first two charges relate to his peaceful expression of his religious opinions about the veracity of certain sayings of the prophet and his criticism of several seventh century Islamic figures. Other charges include insulting the country's rulers and the Supreme Council of Religious Scholars, and describing them as extremists, and accusing Gulf countries of supporting the Islamic State (also known as ISIS).[\[85\]](#)

Prosecutors also charged al-Maliki with praising Hezbollah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, and having sympathy for the Houthi group in Yemen, and expressing his religious views in television interviews, attending discussion groups in Saudi Arabia, writing books and studies and publishing them outside of Saudi Arabia, possession of banned books, defaming a Kuwaiti man by accusing him on Twitter of supporting ISIS, and violating the country's notorious cybercrime law.[\[86\]](#)

The charge sheet also accuses al-Maliki of crossing illegally from Saudi Arabia into northern Yemen for research about his family origins and history in 2001, after Saudi authorities had banned al-Maliki from travel abroad. Saudi Arabia does not have a comprehensive written penal code and only a limited number of written criminal regulations. Charges not based on a written text, which include all but one of al-Maliki's, do not have a statute of limitation.[\[87\]](#)

Evidence cited by prosecutors in the charge sheet consisted entirely of al-Maliki's alleged confession, his tweets, and material confiscated from his home and electronic devices. It says that he allegedly confessed to calling for freedom of belief, and that it is the right of any person to adopt beliefs that he sees as correct, and it is not permitted to restrict these [beliefs] or impose certain beliefs, as well as his denial that the crime of apostasy should be punishable by death, seeing that there is no truth to it legally. He also allegedly confessed to saying that those [clerics] who ban singing or music in all its forms are extremists, as there is no evidence for banning it and that the prophet [peace be upon him] listened to it.[\[88\]](#)

International standards, including the Arab Charter on Human Rights, ratified by Saudi Arabia, require countries that retain the death penalty to use it only for the most serious crimes, and in exceptional circumstances. In 2012, the United Nations special rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary, or arbitrary executions stated that where used, the death penalty should be limited to cases in which a person is intentionally killed and not used to punish drug-related offenses.

In addition to the post-2017 arrest waves, Saudi Arabia has reportedly deployed commercially available surveillance technologies to hack into the online accounts of government critics and dissidents. Citizen Lab, an

academic research center based in Canada, concluded with high confidence that in 2018 the mobile phone of Omar Abdulaziz, a prominent Saudi activists based in Canada, was targeted and infected with spyware known as Pegasus, which is produced and sold by the Israeli technology firm NSO group.^[89] According to Citizen Lab, Once a phone is infected [with Pegasus spyware], the customer has full access to a victims personal files, such as chats, emails, and photos. They can even surreptitiously use the phones microphones and cameras to view and eavesdrop on their targets.^[90]

In addition to Abdulaziz, other Saudis abroad have alleged that the Saudi government targeted them with cyberattacks using Pegasus in recent years, including an unnamed researcher for Amnesty International, UK-based Saudi human rights activist Yahya Assiri, and UK-based Saudi comedian and dissident Ghanim al-Masarrir.^[91]

Washington Post columnist David Ignatius revealed in March 2019 that Saudi officials acquired spyware tools from NSO Group, but that the company had frozen new requests from the kingdom over concerns that it may have been misused.^[92] In response to growing international criticism over its sales of spyware to abusive governments, NSO group announced a new Human Rights Policy in September 2019, pledging to identify, prevent and mitigate the risk of adverse human rights impact related to the use of its spyware and surveillance products.^[93]

Saudi officials have openly used Twitter to harass and target dissidents. On August 17, 2017, Saud al-Qahtani himself started the hashtag #The_Black_List in which he called on Saudis to suggest online critics to target.^[94] Before his dismissal in October 2018, al-Qahtani also served as the director of the Saudi Federation for Cyber Security and Programming, a governmental organization that seeks to build national and professional capabilities in the fields of cyber security and programming in line with established and internationally recognized practices and standards.^[95]

In addition, rumors have surfaced among Saudi dissidents that Saudi authorities may have the capability of unmasking anonymous Twitter users. The rumors appear driven in part by a Tweet by al-Qahtani from August 18, 2017, in which he states: Does a pseudonym protect you from #the_black_list? No 1) States have a method to learn the owner of the pseudonym 2) the IP address can be learned using a number of methods 3) a secret I will not say.^[96]

More broadly, Saudi Arabias targeting of critics has been a growing problem, including online critics on Twitter, whom authorities have arrested or intimidated into silence.^[97]

In addition to the mass arrest campaigns of dissidents since Mohammed bin Salman became crown prince in June 2017, information from Saudi activists and media reports indicates that incidents of torture and mistreatment in detention have also increased.

In March 2019, the Guardian newspaper reported that it had received several leaked medical reports following examinations of at least 60 detainees commissioned by King Salman. The medical reports reportedly noted that detainees were suffering from ailments including malnutrition, cuts, bruises and burns.^[98] Detainees examined included Adel Banaemah, Mohammed Al Bisher, Fahad al-Sunaidi, Zuhair Kutbi, Abdulaziz Fawzan al-Fawzan, Yasser al-Ayyaf, as well as prominent womens rights activists Samar Badawi, Hatoon al-Fassi, and Abeer Namankani.^[99]

The most high-profile allegations of torture and mistreatment that have come to light stem from the Ritz-Carlton detentions between November 2017 and February 2018 and the allegations of torture by womens rights advocates from May to August 2018.

In November 2018, Human Rights Watch obtained credible evidence that Saudi authorities tortured at least four women activists in detention. The torture included electric shocks, whippings, waterboarding, and sexual harassment and assault including touching and groping.^[100]

The treatment of prominent activist Loujain al-Hathloul was described in detail by her sister in an article for the *New York Times* in January 2019. According to her sister, [Loujain] said she had been held in solitary confinement, beaten, waterboarded, given electric shocks, sexually harassed and threatened with rape and murder. My parents then saw that her thighs were blackened by bruises.^[101] Other human rights groups have reported additional allegations, including prolonged solitary confinement of the women, displaying naked photographs of one of the women during interrogation, beatings on the feet (*falaka* or *bastinado*), and forcing two detainees to kiss each other on the lips.^[102]

According to informed sources, the torture sessions took place at an unofficial detention facility called a hotel or officers guesthouse near Jeddah. The women were held there between May and August. One source told Human Rights Watch that the men responsible for mistreating the women were from cyber security, a probable reference to officers working under the authority of the former royal court adviser Saud al-Qahtani, who was reportedly fired for his role in the murder of prominent Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in October 2018.^[103] After transferring all the women to Dhahban Prison in August, sources stated that authorities would occasionally take women out of the prison for additional torture sessions at the unofficial detention facility.^[104]

Around December 2018, following reporting of the allegations, authorities transferred some of the women to al-Hair Prison in Riyadh, others to Dammam Prison in Dammam, while some remain in Dhahban Prison.^[105] Western media outlets have reported that Saudi authorities opened two investigations into the torture allegations by womens rights advocates, one by Saudi Arabias Human Rights Commission, a government agency, and one by Saudi Arabias Public Prosecutor, which reports directly to the royal court.^[106]

On March 1, 2019, Saudi Arabias Public Prosecution announced that it would refer the women to trial. A representative of the prosecution office denied the torture allegations, telling media that the allegations had been investigated by the Public Prosecution and Human Rights Commission and found to be unsubstantiated.^[107]

In March 2018, the *New York Times* reported that Saudi authorities used physical abuse to coerce so-called corruption detainees to hand over assets following their detention in the Ritz-Carlton hold in early November 2017. The report stated that at least 17 people required hospitalization for abuse in detention, including one, Maj. Gen. Ali al-Qahtani, an aide to Prince Turki bin Abdullah, who later died in detention. The report cited a person who saw the body, which had signs of physical abuse including a twisted neck and burns that appeared to be from electric shocks.^[108]

The *Times* expanded on these initial allegations in November 2018, reporting that the mistreatment included beatings, electrical shocks and suspension upside down for long periods. The November report also said that some former detainees had shown their family members lasting scars from beatings and electric shocks, and in one case a photo of the bruises and scars was shared with the *Times*.^[109]

The *Times* also reported that among those tortured in the Ritz-Carlton was medical doctor Walid al-Fitaihi who holds both Saudi and American nationality. During an interrogation session which he later reportedly recounted to friend, he was slapped, blindfolded, stripped to his underwear and bound to a chair. He was shocked with electricity in what appears to have been a single session of torture that lasted about an hour.^[110]

The *Wall Street Journal* reported in December 2018 that another detainee, Hani Khoja, a former employee of the management consulting firm McKinsey and Company, was repeatedly beaten by Saudi authorities at the Ritz-Carlton.^[111] Authorities eventually released Khoja in January 2019.^[112]

After Mohammed bin Salman became crown prince, the Saudi authorities initiated a series of arrest campaigns which appeared aimed at stamping out all domestic opposition to his policies and reforms. The arrests targeted clerics, intellectuals, journalists, businesspeople, royal family members, high-level government officials, and womens rights advocates.

Human Rights Watch compiled lists of detainees from available evidence including interviews with Saudi human rights activists, official statements, and media reports. The lists are not exhaustive. Unless otherwise indicated, the latest available information indicates that individuals listed remain in detention.

Human Rights Watch does not endorse all the views expressed by individuals mentioned in this report. These views, which in some cases may be offensive or objectionable, nevertheless do not amount to speech that Saudi Arabia can lawfully restrict without violating international human rights standards.

In September 2017, three months after Mohammed bin Salman became crown prince, Saudi authorities launched a sweeping arrest campaign targeting dozens of prominent Saudis including clerics, academics, intellectuals, journalists, and human rights activists.

Among the individuals arrested were popular clerics Salman al-Awda, Awad al-Qarni, and Ali al-Omari. Al-Awda and al-Qarni were members of the Sahwa Movement in the early 1990s, which called for reforms in Saudi Arabia including an elected parliament and constitution. Both maintain large followings on social media platforms. Saudi authorities also targeted individuals such as Essam al-Zamil, an economist who had called into question Saudi projections of revenue from the Aramco initial public offering (IPO), as well as Mustafa al-Hasan, an academic, Abdullah Al-Malki, a reformist academic and writer, Hassan al-Maliki, a religious reformist, Khalid al-Alkami, a journalist, and dozens of other clerics including Ibrahim al-Nasser, and Ibrahim al-Fares.^[113] Authorities imprisoned human rights activists Abdulaziz al-Shubaili and Issa al-Hamid around the same time, after both had recently lost appeals of convictions for their human rights work following unfair trials.^[114]

A September 12 Saudi Press Agency announcement confirmed the arrests, stating that the Presidency of State Security, the countrys new counterterrorism agency, had worked to monitor the intelligence activities of a group of people for the benefit of foreign parties against the security of the kingdom and its interests, methodology, capabilities, and social peace in order to stir up sedition and prejudice national unity. It said the group included Saudis and foreigners.^[115]

Reuters noted that many of those detained had failed to sufficiently back Saudi policies, including the policy of isolating Qatar.^[116] A relative of Salman al-Awda told Human Rights Watch he said he believed that authorities arrested al-Awda because he hadnt complied with an order from Saudi authorities to tweet a specific text to support the Saudi-led isolation of Qatar.^[117]

2017

2018

2019

On the evening of November 4, 2017 the Saudi Press Agency announced a royal decree establishing a high-level anticorruption committee headed by Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman.^[118] Later in the evening, the Saudi-owned news channel Al Arabiyabegan reporting that Saudi authorities were conducting mass detentions of prominent individuals allegedly involved in corruption.^[119]

Those detained included Prince Alwaleed bin Talal, an influential businessman and chairman of Kingdom Holding Company. In addition to Alwaleed bin Talal, the detainees included a former national guard minister, Prince Mutib bin Abdullah; a former finance minister, Ibrahim al-Assaf; a former planning minister, Adel Faki; a former Riyadh governor, Prince Turki bin Abdullah; a former royal court chief, Khalid al-Tuwaijri, Bakr Binladin, the chairman of the Saudi Binladin Group; and Alwaleed al-Ibrahim, owner of the MBC television network.

Following the arrests, three government officials told Reuters that the detainees included 11 princes, four ministers, dozens of former ministers, and several influential businessmen and media executives. The same report indicated that authorities were holding the detainees at the five-star Ritz-Carlton Hotel in Riyadh.^[120]

While in detention at the Ritz-Carlton, authorities pressured detainees to hand over assets to the state in exchange for their release outside of any recognizable legal process, and many reportedly made deals.^[121] In March 2018, the *New York Times* reported that Saudi authorities used physical abuse to coerce detainees to hand over assets, stating that at least 17 detainees required hospitalization following this abuse.^[122]

On January 31, the Saudi Press Agency released a statement by the royal court saying that the anti-corruption committee, led by Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman, had concluded its tasks after summoning 381 people to give evidence.^[123] The statement said that those not indicted on corruption charges had been released, while 87 had agreed to settlements and 56 had been refused settlements and remained in custody to continue the investigations process. The statement said that the authorities had referred eight others to the public prosecutor after they refused to settle. The statement concluded that more than SR400 billion (US\$107 billion) was retrieved to the state treasury in the form of real estate, companies, cash, and other assets.^[124] The Ritz-Carlton hotel in Riyadh resumed normal business operations in early February 2018.^[125]

An informed source close to six of the detainees held in the Ritz-Carlton told Human Rights Watch that even though most of the detainees reached settlements and were released, they remain tightly monitored by authorities, even those who returned to their previous positions or portions of their companies or financial assets. He said that in some cases authorities have forced former detainees to involuntarily return to their former companies or positions or compel them to accept new roles.^[126]

In May 2018, just weeks before Saudi authorities lifted the ban on women driving on June 24, Saudi authorities opened a large-scale coordinated crackdown against the countrys womens rights movement. Authorities initially arrested at least 13 prominent womens rights activists and accused several of them of grave crimes that appear to be directly related to their activism. Government-aligned media outlets carried out an alarming campaign against them, branding them traitors.^[127]

In November 2018, Human Rights Watch obtained credible evidence that Saudi authorities tortured at least four of the detained women activists while holding them at an unofficial detention facility called a hotel or officers guesthouse, presumably in Jeddah, between May and August. The torture included electric shocks, whippings, and sexual harassment and assault including touching and groping.^[128]

On March 1, 2019, Saudi Arabia announced that the detained womens rights advocates would face charges.^[129] A Public Prosecution statement described the detainees as undertaking coordinated and organized activities that aim to undermine the Kingdoms security, stability, and national unity.^[130] A Public Prosecution spokesperson also told local media on March 1 that the Saudi Human Rights Commission and National Society for Human Rights had investigated the torture claims and found no evidence to support them.^[131]

On March 13, Saudi Arabia opened individual trials of 10 women before the Riyadh Criminal Court, and the women learned their charges for the first time. The women on trial included nine women activists including Loujain al-Hathloul, Aziza al-Yousef, Eman al-Nafjan, Mayaa al-Zahrani, Hatoon al-Fassi, Shaden al-Onaizi, Amal al-Harbi, Abeer Namankani, Maysa al-Manea, as well as Roqaya al-Muhareb, an Islamist detainee originally arrested during a separate crackdown in September 2017.^[132]

Informed sources who reviewed the prosecutors written charge sheets have described to Human Rights Watch the content of charges for three of the detainees, nearly all of which are related to peaceful human rights work, including promoting womens rights and calling for an end to Saudi Arabias discriminatory male guardianship system. The sources said that charges against the other women are similar. Prosecutors also accused the women of sharing information about womens rights in Saudi Arabia with journalists based in Saudi Arabia, diplomats, and international human rights organizations, including Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, deeming such contacts a criminal offense.^[133]

On March 28, 2019, authorities allowed the temporary release of Aziza al-Yousef, Eman al-Nafjan, and Roqaya al-Muhareb.^[134] On May 3, Hatoon al-Fassi, Shaden al-Onaizi, Amal al-Harbi, Abeer Namankani, and Maysa al-Manea were also temporarily released.^[135] Loujain al-Hathloul and Mayaa al-Zahrani remain in detention for unknown reasons.

Three other prominent womens rights activists, Samar Badawi, Nour Abdulaziz, and Nassem al-Sadah, were finally brought to trial in Saudi Arabias Specialized Criminal Court on June 27, but the charges against them have not been made public.^[136]

The May 2018 arrests also included men connected to the womens rights movement, including lawyer Ibrahim al-Modaimeegh, activist Mohammad al-Rabea, and businessman Abdulaziz al-Mashal. Al-Modaimeegh and al-Mashal were released in December and January respectively, but al-Rabea remains in detention apparently without charge.^[137]

Around April 4, 2019, despite continuing international criticism stemming from the Khashoggi murder, Saudi Arabia carried out a new round of arrests, this time targeting 13 writers and activists. Saudi human rights activists told Human Rights Watch that they did not know the specific basis of the arrests but said that all of those detained had connections to the Saudi womens rights movement.^[138]

One of those detained on April 4, Salah al-Haidar, is a US-Saudi dual citizen and the son of prominent womens rights activist, Aziza al-Yousef. In addition to al-Haidar, those detained included Bader al-Ibrahim, a writer and medical doctor who is also a US-Saudi dual citizen; and Mohammad al-Sadiq, Abdullah al-Dehailan, Naif al-Hendas, Ayman al-Drees, Redha al-Bori, and Moqbel al-Saqqar, and Thumar al-Marzouqi and his wife, Khadijah al-Harbi, all of whom are writers. The others are Abdullah al-Shehri a lawyer, his wife Sheikha al-Urf, a physician, and Fahad Abalkhail, an independent activist. Al-Harbi was pregnant at the time of her arrest.^[139]

In March, Saudi authorities detained Anas al-Mazrou, a lecturer at King Saud University, after he raised the issue of the detained Saudi womens rights activists during a panel discussion at the Riyadh Book Fair in February.^[140]

1. Salah al-Haidar, writer and activist, detained in April 2019.
2. Bader al-Ibrahim, writer and medical doctor, detained in April 2019.
3. Mohammad al-Sadiq, writer, detained in April 2019.
4. Adullah al-Dehailan, writer, detained in April 2019.
5. Naif al-Hendas, writer, detained in April 2019.
6. Ayman al-Drees, writer, detained in April 2019.
7. Redha al-Bori, writer, detained in April 2019.
8. Moqbel al-Saqqar, writer, detained in April 2019.
9. Thumar al-Marzouqi, writer, detained in April 2019.
10. Khadijah al-Harbi, writer, detained in April 2019.
11. Abdullah al-Shehri, lawyer, detained in April 2019.
12. Sheikha al-Urf, physician, detained in April 2019
13. Fahad Abalkhail, activist, detained in April 2019.
14. Anas al-Mazrou, lecturer at King Saud University, detained in March 2019.

This report was researched and written by Adam Coogle, senior researcher with the Middle East and North Africa division at Human Rights Watch, with extensive research support from a research assistant in the Middle East and North Africa division and Aaron Burroughs, intern with the Middle East and North Africa division.

The report was reviewed by a Michael Page, deputy Middle East and North Africa director; Rothna Begum, senior womens rights researcher; Clive Baldwin, senior legal advisor; and Tom Porteous, deputy program director. Diana Naoum, coordinator in the Middle East and North Africa division, provided editorial and production assistance. Senior coordinator, Jose Martinez, and administrative manager, Fitzroy Hepkins, prepared the report for publication.

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