

The State of the World's Human Rights; Saudi Arabia 2025

Saudi Arabia executed the highest number of people on record in any given year. People were put to death for a wide range of crimes, including drug-related offences often involving foreign nationals. At least two men were executed for crimes allegedly committed when they were children. Despite a series of releases of individuals arrested for exercising their right to freedom of expression, authorities continued to severely restrict freedom of expression and association, with critics and human rights defenders facing long prison terms, grossly unfair trials, and arbitrary travel bans including for those recently released from detention. Migrant workers, including domestic workers, remained bound by the *kafala* (sponsorship) system and continued to face abuse, exploitation and mass deportations. Women continued to face discrimination in law and practice. Saudi Arabia failed to take adequate measures to realize the right to a healthy environment.

Background

Saudi authorities continued to promote their flagship Vision 2030 programme aimed at diversifying Saudi Arabia's economy, fostering a "vibrant" society and positioning the Kingdom as a global leader. Saudi Arabia invested in cultural and entertainment events and prepared to host Expo 2030 and the FIFA World Cup in 2034.

The Ministry of the Interior and its General Directorate of Narcotics Control made regular announcements of drug seizures as part of an ongoing campaign to combat drugs.

In January, Interpol announced plans to open a regional office in Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabia continued to play a prominent regional and international role and hosted high-level diplomatic meetings during the year, including US-Russian talks on ending the war in Ukraine. In May, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman announced that Saudi Arabia had signed deals worth more than USD 300 billion with the USA, including a USD 142 billion weapons package.

Death penalty

Saudi Arabia executed the highest number of people on record in any given year. It executed people for a wide range of crimes, particularly drug-related offences, as well as "terrorism"-related offences.

As in previous years, most of those executed for drug-related offences were foreign nationals, particularly people from Somalia, Ethiopia, Pakistan, Egypt and Afghanistan. Foreign nationals on death row faced severe violations of their right to a fair trial, including lack of access to legal representation, inadequate consular support, and no access to effective interpretation. In some cases, they were subjected to torture or other ill-treatment during pretrial detention to extract “confessions” of guilt.

Saudi judges continued to issue death sentences for *ta’zir* (discretionary) offences – offences where no specific penalty is mandated in law – contradicting official claims that use of the death penalty for discretionary offences had been limited. Executions on the basis of *ta’zir* accounted for at least 47.5% of all reported executions between January 2014 and June 2025. On 16 December, Saudi authorities executed Egyptian fisherman Essam Ahmed after a grossly unfair trial for non-violent, drug-related offences. The judge imposed a *ta’zir* death sentence despite the discretion he had to choose another punishment. Many others remained at imminent risk of execution for non-violent, drug-related offences.

Shia people in Saudi Arabia have long faced discrimination and their peaceful dissent has often been prosecuted as “terrorism”. Authorities continued to execute an alarmingly high number of people belonging to the Shia minority, including those who engaged in dissent in Saudi Arabia’s Eastern Province. While the Shia community comprised an estimated 10-12% of the total Saudi population, Shia people accounted for around 42% of “terrorism”-related executions in the period between January 2014 and June 2025.

Saudi authorities executed two men – Jalal Labbad on 21 August and Abdullah al-Derazi on 20 October – for crimes allegedly committed when they were under 18 years of age.¹ The Specialized Criminal Court (SCC) also retried Yusuf al-Manasif, Jawad Qureiris and Hassan al-Faraj and re-sentenced them to death for crimes allegedly committed when they were children. Other individuals who were under 18 at the time of their alleged crimes remained on death row, some at imminent risk of execution.

Freedom of expression

Critics and human rights defenders continued to be subjected to lengthy prison sentences, unfair trials and travel bans.

In February, UN officials acknowledged that a recording of a panel discussion featuring human rights organizations at the Internet Governance Forum in the capital, Riyadh, had been edited by the UN to redact criticism by a human rights defender following a complaint from the Saudi government.

In April the Public Prosecution announced that it had begun implementing legal procedures against anyone “harming the reputation of tourism” in the kingdom under the Anti-Cybercrime Law and the Anti-Forgery Law.

On 21 August, the SCC appeals court re-sentenced fitness influencer and women’s rights activist Manahel al-Otaibi to five years’ imprisonment, reduced from 11 years, followed by a

five-year travel ban. She was convicted in 2024 for her tweets in support of women's rights and for posting photos of herself without an *abaya* (traditional garment).

During the year, the authorities released dozens of people arrested for exercising their freedom of expression. In February, Salma al-Shehab, a Saudi PhD student who had been living in the UK, was released after serving four years of a 27-year prison sentence following an unfair trial for publishing tweets in support of women's rights. The same month, teacher Asaad bin Nasser al-Ghamdi, who was initially sentenced to 20 years' imprisonment for social media posts criticizing the government's Vision 2030 programme, was released after two years. In June, Dutch-Yemeni national Fahd Ezzi Mohammed Ramadhan was released after 18 months in detention without charge.

Travel bans

Many released prisoners remained subject to lengthy travel bans and measures restricting their freedom of expression. They included Abdulaziz al-Shubaily, co-founder of the now disbanded Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association (ACPRA), released in July after eight years in prison but placed under an eight-year travel and social media ban; and Mohammed al-Qahtani, human rights defender and ACPRA co-founder, released in January after 12 years in prison but subjected to a 10-year travel ban separating him from his family abroad. Women's rights defenders Loujain al-Hathloul and Maryam al-Otaibi remained under travel bans after imprisonment for their human rights activism.

Unfair trials

Almost all human rights defenders brought to trial before the SCC – which remained notorious for undermining fair trial rights – or before other courts were handed harsh sentences following grossly unfair trials.

On 12 May the SCC sentenced British national Ahmed al-Doush to 10 years in prison, later reduced to eight years on appeal. His interrogations revolved around his social media posts and alleged association with a Saudi critic in exile. Saudi authorities withheld court documents, including charges and conviction details, from his family and British consular officials.

Older people's rights

Older detainees remained in harsh detention conditions. Dr Sabri Shalaby, a 69-year-old Egyptian physician, remained in prison serving a 10-year sentence following an unfair trial on baseless "terrorism" charges. During his imprisonment, he was held in solitary confinement, denied medical care, and faced reprisals after suing the Ministry of Health for withheld wages. Sheikh Salman al-Odah, also aged 69, had spent more than eight years in solitary confinement, which constitutes torture under international law. His health, hearing and eyesight deteriorated severely. He was arrested in 2017 after posting a tweet calling for unity

during a diplomatic dispute. A UN expert requested to visit him in April, but authorities denied her access.

Migrants' rights

Saudi Arabia remained home to more than 13 million migrant workers, including almost 4 million domestic workers from Africa and Asia. Migrant workers continued to be bound by the *kafala* (sponsorship) system, which restricts their ability to change jobs or leave the country, putting them at heightened risk of exploitation. Despite some limited reforms, labour abuses were widespread, with workers subjected to wage theft, unsafe working conditions, racial discrimination and substandard living conditions.

Amnesty International research uncovered how migrants delivering Riyadh's new metro system – which opened in January – endured a decade of exploitation with insufficient government protection. Many paid extortionate recruitment fees to secure their jobs on the project before working long hours for low and discriminatory pay, often in the searing summer heat. Hundreds of migrant workers on high-profile projects went unpaid for months – in some cases nearly a year – and were left stranded without adequate social protection and unable to pay for basics such as food. Some protested or took to social media to share their plight. The Saudi government failed to intervene effectively to ensure timely remediation and, in one case, according to a trade union, detained 11 workers for around 48 hours following a protest in September.

Domestic workers continued to be excluded from the Labour Law, a fact which abusive employers exploited and for which they largely enjoyed impunity due to the government's weak enforcement of protections. Kenyan women hired as domestic workers described gruelling and abusive conditions that often amounted to forced labour and human trafficking, including unpaid wages, excessive working hours, and physical and sexual abuse, often underpinned by systemic racism.

In May, the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development (MHRSD) announced a six-month grace period to regularize the status of domestic workers reported as absconding. This was renewed for a further six months in November. The Wage Protection System, previously limited to private sector workers, was extended in May to include domestic workers, who should be paid electronically. This obligation was introduced in stages, applying from 1 January 2026 to all employers of domestic workers. Following a public consultation the MHRSD confirmed significant reductions to its 2021 list of penalties for breaches of labour regulations. These included sharp reductions to fines for violations such as confiscating a worker's passport, denying weekly rest days and breaching the midday summer work ban. The revised framework did, however, introduce new penalties targeting violations against specific categories of workers, including those not covered by the Labour Law, such as those in the maritime, agricultural and domestic work sectors.

In June the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) – led by ITUC Africa – submitted a complaint to the ILO documenting a widespread pattern of forced labour, wage theft, physical

and sexual abuse, and systemic racism particularly – though not exclusively – affecting African migrant workers.

The same day as the ITUC submitted its complaint, the ILO announced the third phase of its cooperation agreement with Saudi Arabia, which focuses on fair recruitment and labour mobility for migrant workers, protection of domestic workers and access to justice, among other things.

Women's and girls' rights

Guardianship laws remained in force, affecting many areas of women's lives. Women continued to face discrimination in law and practice. Almost three years after Saudi Arabia's Personal Status Law was passed on 8 March 2022, the Official Gazette published Implementing Regulations of the Personal Status Law on 21 February. While the Personal Status Law introduced some positive reforms, such as setting a minimum age for marriage, it codified gender-based discrimination in most areas of family life, including in marriage, divorce, child custody and inheritance.

Right to a healthy environment

Saudi Arabia continued to be one of the world's top 10 carbon emitters per capita. Saudi Aramco, majority-owned by the state, remained the world's largest corporate greenhouse gas emitter. The company's CEO said in October that the global surge in electricity demand, driven by electric vehicles and artificial intelligence data centres, would be powered by fossil fuels, not renewables, and that hydrocarbons would "remain the backbone of global energy". The government did not set out plans to phase out fossil fuel production.

On 10 September, Saudi Arabia ratified the Kigali Amendment to the Montreal Protocol, committing to freeze production of hydrofluorocarbons – a potent greenhouse gas – by 2028 and reduce consumption by 85% by 2047.

