Saudi Arabia

	2015	2016
Internet Freedom Status	Not Free	Not Free
Obstacles to Access (0-25)	15	14
Limits on Content (0-35)	24	24
Violations of User Rights (0-40)	34	34
TOTAL* (0-100)	73	72

* 0=most free, 100=least free

Population:	31.5 million
Internet Penetration 2015 (ITU):	70 percent
Social Media/ICT Apps Blocked:	Yes
Political/Social Content Blocked:	Yes
Bloggers/ICT Users Arrested:	Yes
Press Freedom 2016 Status:	Not Free

Key Developments: June 2015 – May 2016

- Internet penetration has risen on the back higher mobile broadband subscriptions (see **Availability and Ease of Access)**.

- Authorities throttled Telegram starting in January 2016 in order to prevent users from sharing images and files over the popular messaging app (see **Blocking and Filtering**).

- The head of Riyadh's Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice was dismissed after public outrage over a video of committee members harassing a girl outside of a mall (see **Digital Activism**).

- Abdulkareem al-Khadar, Abdelrahman al-Hamid, and Abdulaziz al-Sinedi were respectively sentenced to 10, 9 and 8 years in prison for online advocacy against human rights violations. Saudi's Supreme Court upheld a harsh verdict against liberal blogger Raif Badawi in June 2015, who had earlier been sentenced to 10 years in prison and 1,000 public lashes (see **Prosecutions and Detentions for Online Activities**).

- Mobile phone operators are now required to fingerprint customers when selling new SIM cards, limiting the ability of Saudis to use their phones anonymously (see **Surveillance, Privacy, and Anonymity**).

Introduction

Saudi internet freedom improved slightly in 2015-16 due to greater internet access, although the environment remains marked by pervasive censorship and severe punishments for online activism in support of human rights.

Amid fiscal troubles, mounting tensions with Iran, and the ongoing Saudi-led airstrikes in Yemen, authorities in Saudi Arabia are on high alert for public expressions of dissent. The government continues to promote internet use as a tool for economic development and e-government services, where it is ahead of many countries in the region. Mobile broadband penetration continued to increase and Saudis remained some of the most active social media users in the world. But the country's highly centralized internet infrastructure facilitates state censorship, and restrictions on Voice-over-IP (VoIP) increase economic barriers for communication between Saudis and the outside world.

The internet is the least repressive space for expression in the country. Government ministers and public officials—such as the head of Riyadh's so-called morality police—have been dismissed from posts due to public uproar over viral videos of abuse on social media. Large numbers of Saudis use circumvention tools to access banned content and services, even if they are reluctant to express themselves due to strict legal penalties for political, social, or religious speech on certain topics.

Repression has been institutionalized under antiterrorism and cybercrime laws that have instilled fear into activists and ordinary social media users alike. Several well-known activists were sentenced to 8–10 years in prison over the past year, while ordinary citizens and migrant workers were also targeted for smaller online crimes. Social media is heavily monitored and law enforcement agencies have sought to break or bypass encryption in order to spy on users. While the internet has fundamentally changed the way that young Saudis interact with each other, the authoritarian tendencies of the country's political and religious establishments remain fully present in the minds of internet users, whose democratic aspirations remain blocked.

Obstacles to Access

Overall, infrastructure is not considered a major barrier to access except in remote and sparsely populated areas. Internet penetration is highest in major cities such as Riyadh and Jeddah, as well as in the oil-rich Eastern Province. Young Saudis make up the majority of the user population throughout the country.

Availability and Ease of Access

Saudis have enjoyed a rapid growth of internet and communications technologies (ICTs) in recent years. Access increased to 64.9 percent of the population in 2015, up from 41 percent in 2010.[1] Saudi Arabia is home to around 20 million internet users. Fixed broadband subscriptions stood at 45.3 percent of all households, with a majority using ADSL connections. Monthly expenditure on 4G broadband ranged from between SAR 55 (US$11) for a 2GB allowance to SAR 95 (US$25) for a 20GB

---

1   Communications and Information Technology Commission (CITC), *"ICT Indicators Charts: End of Q1 2015,"* 2016, https://bit.ly/1XIRceu.

allowance.[2] Household internet plus television bundles with fiber-optic connections range from SAR 300 (US$80) for speeds of 25 Mbps to SAR 800 (US$213) for 200 Mbps.[3]

Mobile broadband penetration has jumped from 94.5 percent in 2014 to 102 percent in 2015, with some 35 million mobile broadband subscriptions. Standard mobile phone subscriptions have reached to 51.8 million, resulting in a penetration rate of 167.7 percent.[4] Finally, 86.7 percent of mobile subscriptions are prepaid. The number of mobile subscriptions has dropped from a height of 56 million in 2011 as the government deported thousands of illegal workers and deactivated their prepaid mobile accounts.[5]

Restrictions on Connectivity

Saudi Arabia is connected to the internet through two country-level data services providers, the Integrated Telecom Company and Bayanat al-Oula for Network Services, up from a single gateway in years past. These servers, which contain a long list of blocked sites, are placed between the state-owned internet backbone and global servers. All user requests that arrive via Saudi internet service providers (ISPs) travel through these servers, where they can be filtered and possibly blocked. International internet bandwidth increased from 318 Gbps in 2010 to 1321 Gbps in 2014.[6]

The country's regulator has taken an aggressive stance toward VoIP services that circumvent the country's regulatory environment and, by some indication, the surveillance apparatus. The use of Viber to make calls has been blocked since June 2013, while WhatsApp calling has been restricted since March 2015.[7] The authorities have also threatened to institute further restrictions on services such as Skype.[8]

ICT Market

The two country-level service providers offer services to licensed ISPs, which in turn sell connections to dial-up and leased-line clients. Broadband and mobile phone services are provided by the three largest telecommunications companies in the Middle East: Saudi Telecom Company (STC), Mobily (owned by Etisalat of the United Arab Emirates), and Zain (from Kuwait). Two newly licensed virtual operators have entered the market, operating on the infrastructure of existing companies: Virgin Mobile in October 2014 (operating with STC) and Lebara in December 2014 (operating with Mobily).

Several ISPs provide zero-rating services to consumers. For example, access to Wikipedia is provided free of charge by STC to all of its mobile data users,[9] while Zain provides unlimited access to YouTube as part of one of its prepaid mobile packages.[10]

---

2   Mobily, "Connect 4G," 2015, http://bit.ly/1tJ6Rch.

3   Mobily, "Package Prices," 2015, http://bit.ly/1sFClRf.

4   CITC, "ICT Indicators Charts: End of Q1 2015," 2016, https://bit.ly/1XIRceu.

5   Matt Smith, "Saudi mobile subscriptions shrink on labor crackdown, hajj limits," Al Arabiya News, January 26, 2014 https://bit.ly/1HaGC9I.

6   CITC, "Annual Report, 2014," 2015, https://bit.ly/1U9q2vL.

7   "WhatsApp's new call service to be blocked in KSA" ITP.net, March 17, 2015, http://bit.ly/2bPpYm0

8   "CITC blocks Viber", Saudi Gazette, June 5, 2013, http://bit.ly/1VLVW28.

9   Kul Wadhwa, "Wikipedia Zero reaches 230 million mobile users with Saudi Telecom partnership," Wikimedia blog, October 17, 2012, http://bit.ly/1NYU4gZ.

10   Zain, "Shabab Package," http://bit.ly/1NpWlWH.

Internet cafes, once prevalent, have become less popular in recent years due to the broad availability and affordability of home broadband access. Internet cafes are mainly used by youth from lower socio-economic backgrounds to congregate and socialize. Conversely, coffee shops have grown in popularity among business people, young adults, and single males, who enjoy free Wi-Fi access with their paid beverages.

Regulatory Bodies

Previously, all internet governance fell under the purview of the Internet Services Unit (ISU), a department of the King Abdulaziz City for Science & Technology (KACST). Established in 1998 and reporting directly to the Vice President for Scientific Research Support of KACST, the ISU now only provides internet access to government departments, as well as Saudi research and academic institutions.[11] In 2003, the governmental Saudi Communication Commission was renamed to become the Communications and Information Technology Commission (CITC) and became responsible for providing internet access to the private sector, in addition to resolving conflicts among the private telecommunication companies.[12] The CITC is also responsible for controlling the price that telecommunications companies are allowed to charge for cross-network calls. For example, in February 2015, the maximum charge of local voice calls between different networks was lowered.[13] Furthermore, the CITC sends content removal requests to social networks in political cases (see "Content Removal" section below). The board of directors of the CITC is headed by the minister of communications and information technology.[14]

Limits on Content

The Saudi government continued to employ strict filtering of internet content throughout 2015 and early 2016. Self-censorship remains prevalent when discussing topics such as politics, religion, or the royal family. Nonetheless, high levels of social media use have driven an immense diversification of online content, offering Saudis a multitude of perspectives beyond state-controlled media. These tools have also been used by ordinary citizens and human rights activists to raise awareness of issues surrounding political reform, poverty, gender inequality, and corruption.

Blocking and Filtering

Popular social media and communication apps are not blocked in the country, although authorities have imposed restrictions on their use. For example, messaging app Telegram has faced throttling since January 9, 2016, when users reported severe bandwidth limitations preventing file- and image-sharing.[15] Telegram's CEO confirmed the issue, but said that the "reasons [behind the restrictions] are unknown."[16] VoIP services offered by popular apps have also been restricted (see "Restrictions on

11   CITC, "CITC Roles and Responsibilities", accessed March 2, 2013, http://bit.ly/1g9sAuI.
12   CITC, "Background," accessed on June 10, 2015, http://bit.ly/1KE1eLk.
13   "The Communication Commission Reduces the Charge Between Telecommunication Companies," [in Arabic] *Al Riyadh Newspaper*, February 22, 2015, http://www.alriyadh.com/1024133.
14   CITC, "Board of Directors", accessed on June 10, 2015, http://bit.ly/1OcShbq.
15   Amir-Esmaeil Bozorgzadeh , "UPDATED: Telegram's Troubled Times In The Middle East" *TechCrunch*, January 12, 2016, http://tcrn.ch/1PpVhhB.
16   Pavel Durov on *Twitter* https://bit.ly/1Qy2fHM, and The Telegram Team, "Voice Messages 2.0, Secret Chats 3.0 and..." *Telegram Blog*, February 12, 2016, https://bit.ly/1QWdTqr.

Connectivity").

Officially, sites that are judged to contain "harmful," "illegal," "anti-Islamic," or "offensive" material are routinely blocked, including pages related to pornography, gambling, and drugs. Authorities also seek to disrupt violent networks and the dissemination of extremist ideology. Criticism of the Saudi royal family or that of other Gulf Arab states is not tolerated, and neither are sites that organize political opposition or question the ruling family's strict conception of Islam.[17] Websites that may be used to distribute copyrighted materials, such as the Pirate Bay,[18] are blocked.[19] In 2014, the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology (MCIT) blocked dozens of websites for failing to obtain an online publication license.[20] The practice continues, with the blockage of the London-based newspaper *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed* and its English equivalent *The New Arab* in January 2016.[21]

Websites and social media pages belonging to human rights or political organizations, such as the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Organization (ACPRA) and the Arab Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI), are blocked.[22] Sites belonging to several Saudi religious scholars and dissidents are blocked,[23] as well as those related to the Shi'a religious minority, such as Rasid,[24] Yahosein, and Awamia.[25] Authorities also blocked the website of the Islamic Umma Party, the country's only underground (and illegal) political party, which has called for the royal family to step down.

Website mirroring is often used to circumvent blockage, but mirrors are often detected and blocked in a cat-and-mouse game. For example, authorities blocked the official website for the "October 26th Women Driving campaign" on September 29th, 2013. One week later, a mirror site was also blocked.[26] The CITC has been developing blocking tools based on IP address, in order to prohibit websites from circumventing blockage by changing their domain name. Currently, this affects over 2,500 websites.[27] In one example, the CITC unblocked the website Mustamel after the owners complied with a request from the CITC to remove illegal advertisements.[28]

The CITC has also blocked individual social media pages that demand political reforms or civil rights. However, the move by many companies to standardize encrypted "HTTPS" communication has rendered much of this blockage useless, since it is technically very difficult for authorities to block individual pages on an HTTPS domain, rather than a standard HTTP domain. Authorities have occasionally moved to block entire online products and services for breaching the country's

17   "The censorship policy of websites that spread extremist ideologies has proven its success" [in Arabic] *Al Arabiya News*, December 22, 2012, https://bit.ly/1Fr25fm.

18   Ernesto, "Saudi Arabia Government Blocks The Pirate Bay (and More)," *TorrentFreak*, April 2, 2014, http://bit.ly/1KZwhQz.

19   "Ministry of Culture and Information blocks 52 websites for infringing the rights of authors," [in Arabic] *Al Riyadh Newspaper,* October 2012, https://bit.ly/1PrEspC.

20   Rory Jones and Ahmed al-Omran, "Saudi Arabia Plans to Regulate Local YouTube Content," *The Wall Street Journal*, April 24, 2014, http://on.wsj.com/1JQuBEu.

21   Jasper Jackson "Saudi Arabia, UAE and Egypt block access to Qatari-owned news website" *The Guardian*. 5 January 2016 https://bit.ly/1mzqvw2.

22   According to the Alkasir.com, which provides information on blocked websites, the URLs acpra6.org and anhri.net are blocked in Saudi Arabia: "Cyber-Censorship Map," Alkasir, accessed on March 2, 2013, https://alkasir.com/map.

23   Blocked websites of Saudi religious scholars include: www.almoslim.net, www.albrrak.net, and islamqa.info/ar;"Blocking some sites because they violate rules and spread bold ideas and theses" [in Arabic] *Al Arabiya*, April 6, 2012, http://bit.ly/1EUWChv.

24   Adala Center, "A list of blocked sites from within Saudi Arabia" [in Arabic] accessed on December 22, 2012, http://bit.ly/1NpMiAZ.

25   "Cyber-Censorship Map," Alkasir, accessed on March 2, 2013, https://alkasir.com/map.

26   Osama Khalid, "Saudi Authorities Block Women Driving Websites," *Global Voices*, October 8, 2013, http://bit.ly/1QmGLti.

27   CITC, *Annual Report 2014*, [in Arabic], pg 32 http://bit.ly/1L1xxCA.

28   "For the second time Haraj site blocked in Saudi Arabia" [in Arabic] *QBS News*, March 26, 2013, http://bit.ly/1VNpw7s.

strict laws. In September 2012, the government threatened to block all of YouTube if Google, the site's owner, did not restrict access to the controversial "Innocence of Muslims" video containing an offensive depiction of the Prophet Mohammed. Google later blocked the video in Saudi Arabia.[29]

The government responds to blockage requests from members of the public, who can use a web-based form to submit a complaint regarding undesirable material.[30] Once an individual submits the form, a team of CITC employees determines whether the request is justified. In 2014, the CITC received 466,863 blockage requests, and complied in 94.3 percent of cases. Pornographic content accounted for 85.6 percent of these requests. Sites can also be unblocked through a similar process.[31]

The government is somewhat transparent about what content it blocks. While the list of banned sites is not publicly available, users who attempt to access a banned site are redirected to a page displaying the message, "Access to the requested URL is not allowed!" In addition, a green background is displayed on sites blocked by the CITC, whereas sites blocked by the ministry of culture and information for licensing violations or copyright infringement have a blue background. The country's data service providers must block all sites banned by the CITC,[32] and failure to abide by these bans may result in a fine of up to SAR 5 million (US$1.33 million), according to Article 38 of the Telecommunication Act.[33] It should be noted, however, that many Saudi internet users have become savvy at using circumvention tools such as Hotspot Shield, which allows users to access a virtual private network (VPN) to bypass censorship,[34] but the websites of many other tools to circumvent blockage, such as Tor and the major VPN providers, are blocked by the government.[35]

Content Removal

Blocking and filtering are compounded by the prior censorship that online news moderators and site owners must exercise. Gatekeepers frequently delete user-generated content that could be deemed inappropriate or inconsistent with the norms of society, as they can be held legally liable for content posted on their platforms.[36] This often results, for example, in keeping only progovernment user comments. It is unusual to find any antigovernment comments on the websites of major Saudi newspapers, which do not reflect the diversity of political views seen on social networks.

The CITC also sends requests to social networks to remove content. Facebook's Government Requests Report of the first half of 2014—the latest information available as of mid-2016—cites seven processed requests that were "reported by the Communications and Information Technology Commission (CITC) under local laws prohibiting criticism of the royal family."[37] Google report that removal requests jumped from zero to eight during the second half of 2015, with the majority of requests related to alleged religious offenses and ordered by executive agencies, rather than courts.

29   "YouTube blocks 'Innocence of Muslims' in Saudi Arabia", *Al Arabiya News*, September 19, 2012, http://bit.ly/1iv2VhN.

30   CITC, "Block Request Form, "Internet.gov.sa, http://web1.internet.sa/en/block.

31   CITC, "Unblock Request Form, "Internet.gov.sa, http://web1.internet.sa/en/unblock.

32   CITC, "General Information on Filtering Service", Internet.gov.sa, accessed on September 30,2012, http://bit.ly/1MbhO5y

33   Telecommunication Act of Saudi Arabia, [in Arabic], http://bit.ly/16Jzjj5.

34   Saudis refer to this circumvention tool as a "proxy breaker."

35   Examples include Hotspot Shield, Hide My Ass! and AirVPN.

36   "Raif Badawi's wife provides "Anhaa" with the list of charges against her husband and calls for his release [in Arabic] *Anhaa*, April 25, 2013, http://www.an7a.com/102662.

37   Facebook, "Saudi Arabia," *Government Requests Report,* January-June 2014, accessed on November 4, 2014, http://bit.ly/1VLX6ec.

Google complied in 14 percent of cases.[38] On the other hand, Twitter reported only one removal request from July 2015 to June 2016, which resulted in an account being reported. [39]

Copyright takedown requests have also been used to restrict political speech. In September 2014, an episode of a satirical show on YouTube called *Fitnah* was censored when the Saudi TV channel Rotana sent a Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA) notice to take it down. The show used footage from the channel to criticize its owner, Prince Waleed Bin Talal, who was accused by the show of being responsible for the takedown request.[40] The video was later restored.[41]

Media, Diversity, and Content Manipulation

Social media users are increasingly careful about what they post, share, or "like" online, particularly after the passage of a new antiterrorism law in 2014. Users who express support for extremism, liberal ideals, minority rights, or political reforms, in addition to those who expose human rights violations, are closely monitored and often targeted by the government. Questioning religious doctrine is strictly taboo, particularly content related to the prophet Mohammed. Influential Twitter users are growingly fearful of expressing support for outspoken activists who have been recently sentenced to jail time. Government consultants have stopped contributing to foreign newspaper articles due to pressure from other government agency representatives.

With so much activity occurring on social networks, the Saudi government maintains an active presence online as a means of creating the illusion of popular support for its policies. It is believed the government employs an "electronic army" to constantly post progovernment views, particularly on social media. Progovernment trolls have taken to "hashtag poisoning," a method of spamming a popular hashtag in order to disrupt criticism or other unwanted conversations through a flood of unrelated or opposing tweets. Through the use of a "bot," such as those provided by Yoono.com, one individual can send thousands of tweets to a hashtag at the same time.[42] While the tweet may contain the same message, the bot sends the tweet on behalf of numerous fabricated accounts, created by combining random photos of faces with names culled from the internet. The government also influences online news reporting by offering financial support to news sites such as *Sabq* and *Elaph* in return for coordination between site editors and the authorities.[43]

Whereas the authorities provide monetary support to progovernment websites, the owners of opposition websites can come under strong financial pressures as a result of the country's environment of censorship. Revenue from third-party advertisers can be heavily impacted by a government decision to block a website. The government can also request advertisers cancel their ads on a particular website in order to pressure the website to close. Restrictions on foreign funding further inhibit the sustainability of websites that are critical of the ruling system. Numerous sites

---

38   Google, "Saudi Arabia," Transparency Report, https://www.google.com/transparencyreport/removals/government/SA/?hl=en.

39   Twitter , "Saudi Arabia," *Transparency Report*, https://transparency.twitter.com/en/countries/sa.html.

40   "YouTube Blocks Fitna Show In Response to a Request from Rotana." [in Arabic] al-Tagreer, September 7, 2014. https://bit.ly/1Tb7KKZ [offline]

41   Maira Sutton, "Copyright Law as a Tool for State Censorship of the Internet," Electronic Frontier Foundation, December 3, 2014, http://bit.ly/1rVSJmg.

42   "Fake accounts and drowning the hashtag in Twitter [in Arabic] *Osama Al Muhaya*, March 16, 2013, http://bit.ly/1Q13N8g.

43   "Othman Al-Omair in Turning Point 8-5" [in Arabic] YouTube video, 8:11, published by Alnahry2009, May 31, 2010, http://bit.ly/1LXn9um.

---

have been closed for copyright violations,[44] or for featuring advertisements for drugs.[45]

Arabic content is widely available, as are Arabic versions of applications such as chat rooms, discussion forums, and social media sites. While opposition blogs and online forums were once the main venue for discussing political and social matters, most Saudis now use social media instead. Similarly, Saudis are the largest adopters of Twitter in the Arab world.[46] In 2015, it was estimated that 53 percent of internet users in Saudi Arabia have accounts on Twitter.[47]

Saudi companies such as C3 (Creative Culture Catalyst) and Jeddah-based UTURN have sprung up to provide funding and support for video production in the kingdom, with great success. Fahad Albutairi, host of the YouTube show La Yekthar, touches on social and political issues, such as women's right to drive. Opposition figures abroad use YouTube as a platform for distributing their audio and video content, since their websites are blocked within the country.[48] Omar Abdulaziz, founder of the Yakathah channel on YouTube, produces political commentary shows from Canada which are very critical of progovernment propaganda and call for political reform.

Digital Activism

Saudis have employed online tools for holding government officials accountable, mainly through the use of smartphones to capture videos of corruption or improper behavior. In February 2016, the head of the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (CPVPV) in Riyadh was dismissed after a video showing members of the CPVPV chasing a girl outside a mall in the Saudi capital.[49] That same month, online uproar over the airing of a documentary about Hezbollah's leader by the Saudi-funded Al-Arabiya news channel led to the dismissal of its head, Turki al-Dukial.[50] Local media took both cases as gestures of the new king's intolerance for public officials' moves to offend the "dignity" of citizens.[51]

Activists from the local LGBTI community have used digital tools to push back against online hate speech. By reporting account violations to YouTube and Twitter, activists took down popular local accounts such as the YouTube comedy channel Fe2aFala, which had called for the execution of all homosexuals in an episode featuring a reported same-sex wedding party in Riyadh, as well as the Twitter accounts of @_YAS8R_ for inciting violence against homosexuals and @I_mohdiary (which has over one million followers) for comparing homosexuals to animals. Some of these accounts have been restored after removing the offensive content.

The anonymous Twitter user @Mujtahidd, which was called "Saudi's Julian Assange,"[52] continues

---

44   "CITC closed down Haraj site after advertising half kilo Hashish," [in Arabic], *AlSharq Newspaper*, March 30, 2013, http://bit. ly/1LXn9um.

45   "Saudi Arabia closes 52 sites violated intellectual property copyrights," [in Arabic], *Ameinfo*, October 16, 2012, http://www. ameinfo.com/ar-248952.html [offline]

46   Lori Plotkin Boghardt,"Saudi Arabia's War on Twitter," *Middle East Voices,* December 12, 2013, http://bit.ly/1hdwdd7.

47   Arab Social Media Report 2015, p34 http://bit.ly/1oDXLDB

48   Examples include Sa'ad Al-Faqih, Mohammad al-Massari and Mohammad al-Mofarreh.

49   "Saudi Arabia: The head of the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice in Riyadh Abdullah al-Fawaz was dismissed" *ArabianBusiness.com*, February 14, 2016, http://bit.ly/2boxEvh.

50   "A 'Saudi Version' of 'Hassan' Story'", *al-Araby al-Jadeed*, February 24, 2016, http://bit.ly/2fl7RI1.

51   "Salman stands for the dignity of the nation, and protects the freedom of the press...," [in Arabic], *Sabq*, May 5, 2015, http://sabq.org/uO5gde.

52   "Saudi's 'Julian Assange' returns to Twitter," BBC, March 12, 2015, http://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-31840424.

to criticize high profile members of the royal family[53] and to provide detailed descriptions of state corruption.[54] The popularity of the account has increased more than fourfold, from around 410,000 Twitter followers in June 2012 to over 1.8 million as of June 2015. In 2013, the user shared the tweets of dozens of users who defended the government using the exact same wording, thus illustrating the presence of a government Twitter "army."[55] In March 2015, the account was suspended several times over the course of two days, but was reinstated without explanation.

Following attacks by Islamic State militants on Shiite mosques in the Eastern Province in October 2015 and January 2016, large funeral marches were called for through Twitter and Facebook. These marches included explicit political statements, such as calling for the banning of hate speech. Similarly, after the execution of Shiite cleric Nimr al-Nimr on January 2, 2016, several small protests were organized in the Eastern Province, which were covered through Twitter and YouTube. However, numerous arrests and lengthy prison sentences have had an overall chilling effect on online activism.

Violations of User Rights

Saudi courts have delivered some of the harshest prison sentences against online users in the world, with numerous human rights defenders jailed for periods of 10 to 15 years for their online activities. The legal environment surrounding online expression remains a significant impediment to internet freedom, and it has only worsened over the past year. The 2014 antiterrorism law, which equates "insulting the reputation of the state" with terrorism, was used to prosecute peaceful activists.

Legal Environment

Saudi Arabia has no constitution. The Basic Law of Saudi Arabia contains language that calls for freedom of speech and freedom of the press, but only within certain boundaries. The 2000 Law of Print and Press also addresses freedom of expression issues, though it largely consists of restrictions on speech rather than protections. Online journalists employed at newspapers and other formal news outlets maintain the same rights and protections as print and broadcast journalists, and like their counterparts, are also subject to close government supervision. Similarly, laws designed to protect users from cybercrimes also contain clauses that limit freedom of expression. The 2007 Anti-Cyber Crime Law criminalizes "producing something that harms public order, religious values, public morals, the sanctity of private life, or authoring, sending, or storing it via an information network," and imposes penalties of up to five years in prison and a fine of up to SAR three million (US$800,000).[56]

The antiterrorism law, passed in January 2014, defines terrorism in such vague terms as "insulting the reputation of the state," "harming public order," or "shaking the security of the state," effectively criminalizing a range of nonviolent speech.[57] Article 1 of the law defines "calling for atheist thought in any form" as terrorism.[58] Article 4 prohibits support for banned groups by "circulating their

---

53   Robert F. Worth, "Twitter Gives Saudi Arabia a Revolution of Its Own," *The New York Times*, October 20, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/21/world/middleeast/twitter-gives-saudi-arabia-a-revolution-of-its-own.html.

54   "Saudi's 'Julian Assange' returns to Twitter," BBC, March 12, 2015, http://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-31840424.

55   Assaflovhotmail, Twitter post, February 28, 2013, 7:04 PM, http://bit.ly/1EOATbn.

56   Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Royal Decree No. M/17, Anti-Cyber Crime Law, March 2007, http://bit.ly/VWXEmI.

57   Human Rights Watch, "Saudi Arabia: New Terrorism Regulations Assault Rights," March 20, 2014, http://bit.ly/1d3mLN9.

58   Elliot Hannon, "New law in Saudi Arabia Labels All Atheists as Terrorists," *Slate*, April 1, 2014, http://slate.me/1ifyNk9.

contents in any form, or using slogans of these groups and currents [of thought], or any symbols which point to support or sympathy with them" through audio, visual, or written format, including websites and social media.[59]

Prosecutions and Detentions for Online Activities

Saudi Arabia's restrictive laws have been rigorously applied to silence critical voices and human rights defenders. Since traditional political organizing is banned in the country, many human rights activists conduct activities online given the reach of social media tools in the country. As a result, the authorities often prosecute activists for setting up websites, posting on Twitter, or appearing in YouTube videos documenting human rights abuses or calling for government action.

For example, in October 2015, the Specialized Criminal Court found human rights activist Abdelrahman al-Hamid guilty of inciting public opinion through Twitter, demanding a constitutional monarchy, and storing illegal materials. He was sentenced to nine years in prison, barred from traveling abroad for nine years after his release, and fined US$13,300. Al-Hamid is a co-founder of the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association (ACPRA).[60]

Also in October, Prof. Abdulkareem al-Khadar, a co-founder of ACPRA, was sentenced to 10 years in prison and a subsequent 10-year travel ban.[61] Prof. al-Khadar had been detained since April 2013 and charges included uploading ACPRA statements and video lectures, although the final verdict was not published. Moreover, Abdulaziz al-Sinedi was sentenced to eight years in prison and barred from traveling for another eight years for inciting public opinion, questioning the independence of the judiciary, and describing Saudi Arabia as a police state.[62]

A court in Riyadh disbanded the ACPRA in March 2013 and sentenced two of its members, Abdulah al-Hamid and Mohammed al-Qahtani, to 11 years and 10 years of jail time respectively, in addition to a travel ban equal in length to their jail sentences.[63] Five years of their sentences were based on Article 6 of the Anti-Cyber Crime Law, relating to the creation of a website that could disturb social order.[64] Six founding members of ACPRA are currently in detention.[65] Two founding members of the Islamic Umma Party, al-Wahiby and al-Gamidi,[66] have been in prison since February 2011.[67] Both the ACPRA and the Islamic Umma Party base many of their operations online.

Raif Badawi, the co-founder of the Saudi Arabia Liberals website who has been imprisoned since June 2012, had his sentence increased from 7 to 10 years in jail and from 600 to 1,000 public lashes,

59   Human Rights Watch, "Saudi Arabia: New Terrorism Regulations Assault Rights," March 20, 2014, http://bit.ly/1d3mLN9.

60   "Nine years in prison for a citizen who incited the public opinion against the state and its security agencies using Twitter." *Al Riyadh,* October 16, 2015, http://www.alriyadh.com/1091447.

61   The Associated Press, "Saudi Arabia: Activist Professor Gets 10-Year Sentence" *The New York Times*, October 20, 2015, http://nyti.ms/1VAnJCa.

62   The Associated Press, "Saudi Arabia: 2 Activists Sentenced," *The New York Times*, October 14, 2015, http://nyti.ms/1RjtHWV.

63   "10 years jail for Al-Qahtani and 11 for Al-Hamid in the ACPRA case" [in Arabic], *Sabq*, March 9, 2013, http://sabq.org/onyfde.

64   CITC, "Anti-Cyber Crime Law," March 2007 http://bit.ly/VWXEmI.

65   Those members are Suliaman Al-Rushoody, Mansour Al-Awth, Mousa Al-Garni, Mohamed Al-Bijadi, Saleh Al-Ashwan and Fawzan Al-Harbi.

66   Islamic Umma Party, Twitter Page, accessed on December 22, 2012, http://twitter.com/islamicommapart.

67   Islamic Umma Party, Twitter Page, accessed on March 10, 2012, http://twitter.com/islamicommapart.

as well as a fine of SAR one million (US$266,000) in early May 2014.[68] Badawi was charged with "setting up a website that undermines general security" and "ridiculing Islamic religious figures." On January 9, 2015, Badawi received 50 lashings outside a mosque in Jeddah, following Friday prayer. Footage of the punishment was uploaded to YouTube, resulting in a massive international backlash.[69] Further lashings have been postponed.[70] His case was heard by the Supreme Court, which upheld the verdict in June 2015.[71]

Samar Badawi, a human rights advocate and Raif's sister, was briefly arrested in January 2016[72] and charged with managing her detained ex-husband's account on Twitter, @WaleedAbulkhair. She was released on the following day and ordered to report to a police station for further interrogation.[73]

Ashraf Fayadh, a Palestinian poet based in Saudi Arabia, has been detained since January 1, 2014 on apostasy charges after a complaint that he was spreading atheism through his poetry. He was also charged with violating Article 6 of the country's Anti-Cyber Crime Law for taking and storing photos of women on his phone.[74] On November 17, 2015, Fayadh was convicted of apostasy and sentenced to beheading.[75] However, his sentence was reduced to eight years in prison and 800 lashes on February 2, 2016.[76]

On March 25, 2016, columnist Alaa Brinji was sentenced to five years in prison, an eight-year travel ban, and a fine of SAR 50,000 (US$ 13,300) for tweeting in support of women's right to drive, human rights defenders, and prisoners of conscience.[77]

Authorities have stepped up arrests and prosecutions against ordinary citizens as well. Among some of the cases from the coverage period:

- A Saudi man was sentenced to 10 years in prison, 2,000 lashes, and a SAR 20,000 (US$ 5,300) fine for "spreading atheism online" in February 2016 under the Anti-Cyber Crime Law for 600 "atheist" tweets.[78]

- In December 2015, a Twitter user was sentenced to five years in prison and a subsequent five-year travel ban for "calling for protests through Twitter", "retweeting posts by suspicious

68   Ludovica Iaccino, "Saudi Arabian Online Liberal Activist Raif Badawi Sentenced to 1,000 lashes," *International Business Times*, May 8, 2014, http://bit.ly/1NpU0Lu.

69   Press Association, "Prince Charles raises Raif Badawi case with Saudi king," *The Guardian,* February 10, 2015, http://gu.com/p/45yxv/stw.

70   AFP, "Saudi Arabia postpones flogging of Raef Badawi for third week," *The Guardian*, January 30, 2015, http://gu.com/p/45c4y/stw.

71   AP, "Saudi Arabia: Verdict on Blogger Stands," *The New York Times,* June 7, 2015, http://nyti.ms/1IwJwYE.

72   Ben Hubbard, "Saudi Arabia Arrests Samar Badawi, Human Rights Advocate" *The New York Times*, January 12, 2016, http://nyti.ms/1ZjnHiB

73   Ian Black and Jessica Murphy, "Sister of Saudi blogger Raif Badawi briefly detained in same prison" *The Guardian*, January 13, 2016, http://bit.ly/1OpQQ6H.

74   "Poet faces death for apostasy in Saudi Arabia: Ashraf Fayadh" Amnesty International, November 24, 2015, http://bit.ly/1Ig3b5f.

75   Ben Hubbard, "Artist's Death Sentence Follows a String of Harsh Punishments in Saudi Arabia," *The New York Times,* November 22, 2015, http://nyti.ms/1mTUgah.

76   Ben Hubbard, "Saudi Court Spares Poet's Life but Gives Him 8 Years and 800 Lashes," *The New York Times,* February 2, 2016, http://nyti.ms/1Pz2EY8.

77   "Saudi Arabia: Journalist sentenced to five years in prison for tweets latest victim of crackdown," Amnesty International, March 25, 2016, http://bit.ly/2bjsWwA.

78   "Punishing a citizen for publishing 600 atheist tweets" *Al Watan*, February 27, 2016, http://bit.ly/2bhvDSy

accounts", and "destroying his phone to hide the evidence."[79]

- In January 2016, a physician and a pharmacist were respectively sentenced to 6 months in prison and 100 lashes, and 4 months in prison and 100 lashes, for the defaming the ministry of health on Twitter.[80]

- In March 2016, Abdul Sattar Makandar, an Indian laborer, was arrested for denouncing working conditions via a Facebook video. A crowdfunding campaign was started to cover his legal expenses and the cost of his flight home.[81] As of August 2016, he was still detained.[82]

- In May 2016, the Specialized Criminal Court sentenced a Saudi woman to six years in prison, two of which were in accordance with the Anti-Cyber Crime Law for producing videos that call for the release of detainees and publishing them through Twitter.[83]

Online defamation has also grown. The overall number of defamation cases heard by courts reached over 350 in the period from October 2014 to October 2015; most of the cases are related to social media.[84]

Surveillance, Privacy, and Anonymity

Surveillance is rampant in Saudi Arabia, which justifies pervasive monitoring of political, social, and religious speech under the pretense of protecting national security and maintaining social order. The authorities regularly monitor websites, blogs, chat rooms, social media sites, emails and mobile phone text messages. Evidencing the government's determination to monitor its citizens, the American security expert Moxie Marlinspike published email correspondence with an employee at Mobily who sought to recruit him to help the telecommunications firm intercept encrypted data from mobile applications such as Twitter, Viber, Vine, and WhatsApp.[85]

The Ministry of Culture and Information requires that all blogs, forums, chat rooms, and other sites obtain a license from the ministry to operate, thus putting more pressure on online writers to self-regulate their content.[86] However, this rule is enforced only on popular online publications. Even anonymous users and writers who employ pseudonyms when making controversial remarks face special scrutiny from the authorities, who attempt to identify and detain them.

In January 2016, the CITC required mobile network operators to register the fingerprints of new SIM card subscribers, and announced that it would soon mandate existing subscribers to register their fingerprints as well. The CITC said that the new requirement is meant to "limit the negative effects and violations in the use of communication services."[87] This added to the previous legal requirement

79   "Five year in prison for a citizen who called for protests on Twitter" [in Arabic] *Al-Riyadh Newspaper*, http://www.alriyadh. com/1111065

80   "Imprisonment and lashing for two employees for criticizing the health department in Najran" [In Arabic] *Makkah Newspaper* 10 January, 2016 https://bit.ly/1TBetQn.

81   "Let's Bring Abdul Sattar Home", Ketto, https://www.ketto.org/fundraiser/bringabdulhome.

82   Kundan Srivastava on Facebook http://bit.ly/2bOIMRK.

83   "Six years in prison for a citizen who tempted people in Unaizah," *Al Riyadh*, May 11, 2016, http://www.alriyadh. com/1502213.

84   "Riyadh is the highest in defamation cases with 41%" October 10, 2015 http://www.an7a.com/206507/.

85   Moxie Marlinspike, "A Saudi Arabia Telecom's Surveillance Pitch", *Thought Crime* (blog), May 13, 2013, http://bit.ly/101lYnw.

86   Reporters Without Borders, "Saudi Arabia," *Internet Enemies*, 2012, http://bit.ly/JrLevJ.

87   "Communication Commission mandates companies to register fingerprints before issuing cards " [in Arabic], *Al-Riyadh Newspaper*, January 22, 2015, http://bit.ly/1WEBQ9H

of registering subscribers' real names and identity numbers, and mandating the collection of ID numbers in order to recharge a prepaid mobile card,[88] which was often circumvented by a black market in which vendors sold new SIM cards and prepaid refill cards with pre-existing ID numbers.[89]

Intimidation and Violence

Progovernment Twitter accounts often defame and harass political and social activists using hashtags calling for their arrest. The anonymous accounts often show photos of the king or the interior minister as their avatars. For example, after *The Economist* released a YouTube interview with political activist Loujain al-Hathloul and social critic Fahad Albutairi,[90] Twitter and WhatsApp users accused them of treason and called for their arrest. Furthermore, as legal limits on the detention of suspects were removed, numerous Saudis are now arbitrarily detained for periods of months—and sometimes years—without charge.

Technical Attacks

On June 20, 2015, WikiLeaks announced the release of over 60,000 documents collected from Saudi Foreign Ministry emails. The documents contained top-secret correspondence between Saudi embassies and local parties in countries such as Egypt, Lebanon, Iraq, and Afghanistan.[91] The official Twitter account of the foreign ministry called on citizens not distribute the documents in order to avoid "aiding the enemies of the nation." A foreign ministry spokesman acknowledged that the documents were related to a recent electronic attack and claimed that many were "clearly fabricated," saying that those who distributed the documents would be punished under the country's cybercrime law.[92]

On February 16, 2016, the official, verified Twitter account of the minister of education, @aleissaahmed, was hacked. The hacker posted messages critical of the ministry's performance on issues such as the lack of care for handicapped students and the relocation of teachers to rural areas far from their families.[93] The account was later restored.

On May 22, 2016, the Twitter account of the ministry of labor was briefly hacked, with one tweet posted stating: "The account was hacked. You need to enable security, Ministry of Labour."[94]

On June 3, 2016, hackers infiltrated the website of a*l-Watan* newspaper and posted a fabricated statement by the crown prince condemning Saudi foreign policy in Yemen and Syria.[95] The editor-in-chief of the site accused Iran or the so-called Islamic State as being responsible.[96]

---

88   "User's ID number now required to recharge prepaid mobile phones", *Arab News*, July 4, 2012, http://bit.ly/1azmvzS.

89   Faleh Al-Buyani, "Black market for SIM cards with ID thriving", *Saudi Gazette*, December 31, 2012, http://bit.ly/1Q1amYu.

90   Arrested and jailed for driving in Saudi Arabia" *The Economist*, January 22, 2016, https://youtu.be/XsQaIdTph5Q.

91   Saeed Shah, "Saudi Officials Linked to Jihadist Group in WikiLeaks Cables" June 28, 2015 http://on.wsj.com/1Kjc6Md.

92   Ben Hubbard, "Cables Released by WikiLeaks Reveal Saudis' Checkbook Diplomacy" *The New York Times*, June 20, 2015, http://nyti.ms/1CkuFJb.

93   "The account of the Minister of Education was hacked" *Al Riyadh*, February 16, 2016, http://www.alriyadh.com/1129253.

94   "Official Twitter account of the Ministry of Labor was hacked," al-Sharq Portal, May 22, 2016, http://www.al-sharq.com/news/details/423081.

95   "Saudi Al Watan confirms: it was hacked and 'dishonest statements' of Prince Mohammad bin Nayef where distributed," CNN Arabia, June 5, 2016, http://cnn.it/2bGwMTB.

96   "Saudi Al Watan Editor-in-Chief: Iran hacked the website," Al Arabiya, June 5, 2016, http://bit.ly/2bQnST2.