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HRW – Human Rights Watch (Author)

World Report 2026; Saudi Arabia

Events of 2025

Saudi authorities carried out an unprecedented surge in executions after trials that were likely unfair, executing at least 322 individuals as of early December 2025, which exceeded prior execution records. These included at least two people convicted of crimes committed as children. The June 2025 execution of journalist Turki al-Jasser raised concerns that the Saudi government is using the death penalty to crush peaceful dissent.

Saudi authorities released dozens of people serving long prison terms but continued to imprison and arbitrarily detain many more on the basis of freedom of expression, assembly, association, and belief. Migrant workers continued to face widespread labor abuses, including wage theft and [dying](#) in gruesome yet avoidable [workplace-related accidents](#). Authorities failed to effectively address these issues as they prepare for the 2034 FIFA Men's World Cup.

Death Penalty

Saudi Arabia has seen an unprecedented spike in executions in 2025, having carried out at least 300 executions by October amid serious concerns over lack of due process. Human rights groups [warned](#) that the Saudi government is using the death penalty as a tool to suppress peaceful dissent. Over half of those executed this year have been foreign nationals, and at least 198 were convicted of nonviolent drug offenses as of October, raising further concerns over violations of international legal standards.

Among the executed was journalist Turki al-Jasser, known for [exposing](#) royal corruption. His [execution](#) on June 14 followed an unfair, [secret](#) trial.

Al-Jasser's case is not isolated. Abdullah al-Shamri, Saudi political analyst, was also [executed](#) in 2024 based on his [peaceful expression](#). Religious scholars like Salman al-Odah and [Hassan al-Maliki](#) are also [facing](#) the death penalty. These cases reflect a broader pattern of Saudi authorities targeting activists, journalists, and critics under vague terrorism or national security charges.

Saudi authorities also [executed](#) at least two men, Jalal al-Labbad and Abdullah al-Derazi, in August and October respectively. They were convicted of alleged crimes committed as children. Both had been sentenced to death on terrorism charges related to participating in protests.

Saudi courts [routinely](#) rely on torture-tainted confessions and deny basic legal rights, making fair trials virtually impossible. Despite international law requiring the death penalty be used only for the most serious crimes and never for crimes committed as children under age 18, Saudi Arabia appears to [use](#) it [systematically](#) to eliminate dissent and maintain political control.

Government Opposition and Other Critics

Between December 2024 and February 2025, Saudi Arabia [released](#) at least 44 prisoners, including [Mohammed al-Qahtani](#), [Salma al-Shehab](#), and [Asaad al-Ghamdi](#), all jailed for peaceful expression. However, many more remain imprisoned, and those released face restrictions like travel bans and surveillance. The government continues to detain individuals for exercising basic rights, with high-profile detainees such as Salman al-Odah, [Waleed Abu al-Khair](#), and [Manahel al-Otaibi](#) still in prison.

Saudi authorities continue to use vague counterterrorism and cybercrime laws to silence dissent. Family members of dissidents are also [targeted](#) in retaliation, making it nearly impossible for advocacy to continue from abroad without consequences.

Freedom of Expression

Saudi authorities have intensified their crackdown on freedom of expression to silence dissent, including by the continued detention of fitness instructor [Manahel al-Otaibi](#). She was arrested in 2022 for supporting women's rights on social media and posting photos without an abaya and later forcibly disappeared in December 2024.

Foreign nationals like British citizen [Ahmed al-Doush](#) have been detained over years-old social media activity without fair trial or legal representation.

At the 2024 UN Internet Governance Forum (IGF) held in Riyadh, United Nations officials deleted the video and [transcript](#) of Human Rights Watch and ALQST's workshop discussing the misuse of cybercrime laws to target activists, then reuploaded an [edited](#) version that [censored](#) remarks about Saudi Arabia's human rights abuses. Materials referencing imprisoned activists were also confiscated, and a Human Rights Watch researcher was threatened with expulsion after Saudi officials' complaints. The UN cited the IGF [code of conduct](#), which discourages targeting specific governments, as justification for the edits.

Criminal Justice System

Saudi Arabia's criminal justice system undermines international human rights standards and the rule of law. In March, Saudi Arabia [reportedly](#) extradited Ahmed Kamel, an Egyptian sentenced to life in prison in Egypt in absentia in 2021 for peaceful protests in 2014, in violation of international law and despite [warnings](#) from rights organizations about the serious risk of arbitrary detention and torture if returned to Egypt.

Human rights defender Mohammed al-Bejadi remains arbitrarily [detained](#) in Saudi Arabia more than two years after completing his prison sentence. Al-Bejadi, founding member of the banned Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association (ACPRA), has faced repeated imprisonment for his activism and was most recently sentenced to 10 years in 2018, with five years suspended.

Older Prisoners

Saudi Arabia has been mistreating older prisoners and denying them adequate medical care, highlighted by the [death](#) of 70-year-old academic Qasim al-Qathrdi in prison in April. During a UN expert's [visit](#), Saudi [authorities refused her access](#) to older detainees [Safar al-Hawali](#), 75, and [Salman al-Odah](#), 68, violating international protocols.

Asylum Seekers, Migrants, and Migrant Workers

Migrant workers in Saudi Arabia face widespread labor [abuses](#), some of which may amount to situations of forced labor, across employment sectors and geographic regions, and Saudi authorities are systematically failing to protect them from and remedy these abuses.

Saudi authorities [failed](#) to adequately protect workers from preventable deaths, investigate workplace safety incidents, and ensure timely and

adequate compensation for families, including through mandatory life insurance policies and survivors' benefits. A large majority of deaths in Saudi Arabia are erroneously [classified](#) as "natural" and are neither investigated nor compensated.

Saudi Arabia's legal and regulatory framework fails to address widespread abuses from the *kafala* (sponsorship) system that grants employers' extensive control over workers' lives despite several rounds of labor reforms. Additionally, Saudi Arabia's restrictions on free expression prevents workers from establishing unions and collective bargaining for better labor protections.

Despite reforms, wage theft against migrant workers remains one of the most [widespread](#) abuses in Saudi Arabia. While Saudi Arabia introduced the [wage insurance](#) service in October 2024 for migrant workers in private establishments when employers fail to meet their payment obligations, but it has severe limits and denies remedy in the majority of wage theft cases such as by requiring workers to be unpaid for at least 6 months and if 80 percent of the workers in the company are similarly affected.

Despite the high volume of outdoor workers which will expand as construction advances, Saudi Arabia continues to impose midday bans instead of more robust risk-based measures such as the widely used Wet Bulb Globe Temperature (WBGT) [index](#), which measures occupational heat stress based on air temperature and relative humidity.

FIFA, the international football organization, has [awarded](#) the 2034 World Cup to Saudi Arabia [without](#) proper human rights due diligence and guarantees of effective worker protection requirements despite high construction demands including building 11 new and refurbished stadiums [ahead](#) of FIFA's 2034 World Cup.

Governments also continue to [prioritize](#) trade and other strategic interests with Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries without proper protections for human rights. The forthcoming Trade Agreement between the United Kingdom (UK) and the GCC excludes explicit human rights protections and commitments, including for migrant workers. Such trade agreements risk contributing to abuses against migrant and other workers by further facilitating wage abuse, employer exploitation, and situations that amount to forced labor.

Women and Girls' Rights

The government highlights milestones such as lifting the driving ban on women and expanding workforce participation for women as proof of its modernization. However, many of these reforms are symbolic and carefully curated to promote economic goals, rather than genuine legal and social equality. Women are encouraged to participate in the economy

but remain subject to a deeply entrenched [male guardianship](#) system that restricts their autonomy and legal agency. One UN expert found older women [face](#) discrimination and cumulative disadvantage, including lower, or no, pensions.

The Personal Status Law and its implementing regulations, often cited as a major achievement, [codifies](#) many discriminatory practices under the guise of legal reform. It grants male guardians extensive control over girls' and women's lives, including decisions related to marriage, divorce, and parenting. Women can still be penalized for "disobeying" their husbands, and their access to basic rights like divorce, child custody, or even access to identification documents for themselves and their children, which is limited and often obstructed by legal, administrative, or familial barriers. These obstacles are compounded for non-Saudi women, who may face visa and residency issues if divorced from Saudi sponsors.

Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Saudi authorities continue to [repress](#) LGBT rights and censor all public discussion of gender and sexuality.

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