

Saudi Arabia

Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has consolidated political and economic power, including as chairman of Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund (PIF), a sovereign wealth fund that has [facilitated](#) and benefited from rights abuses. PIF investments in high-profile sports and entertainment events domestically and internationally are used to whitewash the country's abysmal human rights record. Migrant workers, including on [PIF-funded projects](#), face widespread abuses under the *kafala* (sponsorship) system. Saudi Arabian authorities harshly repress any dissent, including by handing down long [sentences](#) or the death [penalty](#) after unfair trials on charges related to peaceful online expression.

Public Investment Fund and Links to Abuses

After the death of King Abdullah in 2015, Mohammed bin Salman took control of key Saudi state security and political [institutions](#) and consolidated political and economic power, including as [chairman](#) and sole decision-maker of Saudi Arabia's sovereign wealth fund, the Public Investment Fund (PIF).

The PIF has facilitated and benefited [directly](#) from serious human rights abuses linked to Crown Prince Mohammed. This includes the crown prince's 2017 "anti-corruption" crackdown that consisted of arbitrary detentions, abusive treatment of detainees, and the extortion of property from Saudi Arabia's elite, as well as the 2018 murder of Saudi critic and journalist Jamal Khashoggi.

Capital from the PIF is being [used](#) for projects that have forcibly evicted residents, razed neighborhoods, subjected workers to serious abuses, and silenced communities. Saudi authorities forcibly evicted members of the Huwaitat community, which has inhabited Tabuk for centuries, from the planned NEOM area, arrested those who protested their evictions, and killed one protesting resident. Two residents received [sentences](#) of 50 years in prison, and three received death sentences for resisting the Saudi government's forced evictions. The Jeddah Central Development Company, a wholly-owned [company](#) of the PIF, forcibly evicted large numbers of middle- and lower-class Saudis, foreigners, and migrant

workers from their homes in Jeddah’s previously vibrant working-class neighborhoods to transform the area into a luxury shopping and tourism district.

PIF investments in the United States, the United Kingdom, and elsewhere in the world also serve a powerful [tool](#) for Saudi Arabia’s soft power and influence. The June 2023 framework agreement between the Professional Golfers' Association (PGA) and PIF-funded LIV Golf includes a “non-disparagement clause” that effectively silences criticism from PGA Tour officials and players of Saudi Arabia’s human rights record.

Freedoms of Expression, Association, and Belief

Saudi authorities continued their campaign to crack down on peaceful social media activity. On May 29, 2024, Saudi Arabia’s counterterrorism tribunal, the Specialized Criminal Court, [convicted](#) Asaad al-Ghamdi, 47, a Saudi teacher, of several criminal offenses related solely to his peaceful expression online. He is the brother of Mohammed al-Ghamdi, a retired Saudi teacher, who was [sentenced](#) to death in July 2023 based solely on his posts on X and YouTube activity.

Rights organizations urged allies of Saudi Arabia to send observers to the trial hearings of Salma al-Shehab and Nourah al-Qahtani, sentenced to 34 and 45 years respectively based solely on their peaceful social media activity. Al-Shehab’s posts on X related to support for women’s rights.

Asylum Seekers, Migrants, and Migrant Workers

Between March 2022 and June 2023, Saudi border guards [killed](#) hundreds of Ethiopian migrants and asylum seekers who tried to cross the southern border with Yemen. These killings would amount to a crime against humanity if committed as part of a Saudi government policy to murder migrants.

Migrant workers represent 42 percent of the country’s population. Yet despite their indispensable contributions, they face widespread labor [abuses](#) across employment sectors and geographic regions, and Saudi authorities are systematically failing to protect them from and remedy these abuses. The Building and Wood Workers’ International Union (BWI) filed a [complaint](#) at the International Labour Organization (ILO) against the Saudi

Arabian Government regarding the exploitative living and working conditions among Saudi-based migrant workers ahead of the December decision by FIFA to grant Saudi Arabia hosting rights for the 2034 FIFA World Cup.

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

Governments continue to [prioritize](#) trade and other strategic interests with Saudi Arabia over human rights. The new UK government has [announced](#) the resumption of negotiations for a free trade agreement with the Gulf Cooperation Council, despite ongoing [concerns](#) about the lack of transparency, oversight, and inclusion of concrete human rights protections and commitments in any agreement, particularly for migrant workers.

Criminal Justice System

Rampant abuses have been documented in Saudi Arabia's criminal justice system undermining rule of law and international human rights standards. The counterterrorism law violates due process and fair trial rights by granting authorities wide powers to arrest and detain people without judicial oversight.

Saudi authorities continue to use overbroad and vague provisions of the notorious counterterrorism law to silence dissent and persecute religious minorities. Asaad and Mohammed al-Ghamdi, Salma al-Shehab, and Nourah al-Qahtani were all sentenced under Saudi Arabia's counterterrorism law for peacefully exercising their right to free expression online.

Death Penalty

In April, a Saudi court [upheld](#) the death penalty sentences for two Saudi men for protest-related offenses allegedly committed as children, despite statements by Saudi Arabia's Human Rights Commission claiming that no one in Saudi Arabia will be executed for a

crime committed as a child. Yousif al-Manasif and Ali al-Mabyook, both from the eastern province where most of the country's Shi'a minority live, were between the ages of 14 and 17 when they were [arrested](#). At least five people [sentenced](#) to death as children remain in imminent danger of execution.

Women's Rights

Saudi Arabia does not have an anti-discrimination law. Saudi Arabia's first codified law on personal status formally [enshrines](#) male guardianship over women and includes provisions that facilitate domestic violence and sexual abuse in marriage. The government did not consult Saudi women's rights activists despite their campaigns for a Personal Status Law that would end discrimination against women. Instead, Saudi women's rights activists have faced arbitrary arrest and detention, torture, and travel bans.

The Personal Status Law requires women to obtain the permission of their male guardian, typically their fathers or brothers, to marry and married women are required to obey their husbands in a "reasonable manner." If a woman refuses without a "legitimate excuse" to have sex with her husband, move into the marital home he provides or stay overnight there, or travel with him, she loses her right to spousal maintenance (*nafaqa*) from her husband, which includes food, housing, clothing, and other "basic needs."

Men have a right to unilaterally divorce their wives, while women can only petition a court to dissolve their marriage contract on limited grounds and must "establish harm" that makes the continuation of marriage "impossible." The law does not define "harm" or what evidence can be submitted to support a case, leaving judges wide discretion to interpret the law and enforce it to maintain the status quo.

The father remains the default guardians of his children, limiting the mother's ability to participate fully in important decisions related to her child, even in cases where the parents do not live together and the court decides that the child should live with the mother. A mother can only act as guardian of her children if a court appoints her.

Women in Saudi Arabia face restrictions preventing them from moving freely in their own country and abroad without the permission of their male guardian. Male guardians and

other family members can report women to the police for being “absent” from their homes, which can lead to their arrest and forcible return home or imprisonment. Women are not allowed to leave prison without a male guardian to accompany them upon release.

Some universities require female students to show they have permission from their male guardian before they can go on field trips or stay at or leave campus. Saudi authorities allow male guardian to obtain court orders or simply notify the authorities to issue travel bans on women under their guardianship.

Non-Saudi women students on a scholarship are required to have a *mahram* (male relative) accompany them for their studies in Saudi Arabia.

Technology and Rights

Saudi Arabia was host of the United Nations’ annual Internet Governance Forum (IGF) that took place in Riyadh from December 15 to 19, 2024. Human Rights Watch alongside other rights groups [called](#) on the Saudi government to free all individuals arbitrarily detained for their online expression ahead of the IGF. It is counter to IGF values for Saudi Arabia to host the IGF, especially given that 2024’s thematic [focus](#) was advancing human rights and inclusion in the digital age.

Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Saudi Arabia has no written laws concerning sexual orientation or gender identity, but judges use principles of uncoded Islamic law to sanction those suspected of having sexual relations outside marriage, including adultery, extramarital and homosexual sex, or other “immoral” acts.

The authorities continue to repress the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people and have [eliminated](#) discussion of gender and sexuality from the public sphere online and offline.

Climate Change Policy and Impacts

Saudi Arabia’s PIF investments in clean energy remain a miniscule proportion of those in

fossil fuels and amount to little more than greenwashing. While the PIF has made limited investment in clean energy, it has added assets in fossil fuels.

The Fund has also served as a tool of distraction from Saudi Arabia's growing contributions to the climate crisis through fossil fuel production and its role leading efforts to undermine and stymie international agreements and other efforts to meaningfully address it.