



SEE THEIR STRUGGLE, REALISE THEIR RIGHTS

**Human Rights Defenders at Imminent Risk in the Gulf
Region and Neighbouring Countries**

**GULF CENTRE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS
2016 ANNUAL REPORT
March 2017**



“These perpetual, sad and cold days and nights will surely end forever someday so that the hopeful promise of life surrounds us all over. There is no doubt in my mind that in our bright future, we will breathe in a free country while celebrating our liberty together... We must believe in this and stand up like before, informed and hopeful.”

(**Bahareh Hedayat**, Iranian human rights defender)

“It’s hard to look pain in the eyes and acknowledge it, but that’s exactly what I ask everyone to do. Yes there are governments willing to turn a blind eye to our suffering and shake hands with those who oppress us, but I also believe that there are enough good people in the world who recognize the good fight, who admire a people who sacrifice in the hope for a better future, and who can’t stand by silently in the face of oppression.”

(**Zainab Al-Khawaja**, Bahraini human rights defender)



The Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR)¹ is an independent, non-profit and non-governmental organisation that provides support and protection to human rights defenders in the Gulf region and neighbouring countries in order to promote freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly. GCHR currently works in the six Gulf Cooperation Council member states (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates), as well as Iran, Iraq, Yemen and Syria.

¹ http://www.gc4hr.org/page/about_us

Table of Content

I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	4
II. INTRODUCTION	5
a) GCHR Activities and Achievements	5
b) Country Summaries	11
III. COUNTRY REPORTS	13
BAHRAIN	13
IRAN	18
IRAQ	20
KUWAIT	21
OMAN	23
QATAR	26
SAUDI ARABIA	27
SYRIA	30
UNITED ARAB EMIRATES	32
YEMEN	34
IV. CONCLUSION	35
V. RECOMMENDATIONS	36

I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

[The Gulf Centre for Human Rights \(GCHR\)](#) attempts, through its work, to create a safer environment and offer support to human rights defenders. GCHR issued 126 appeals, statements and updates on the cases of over 185 human rights defenders in 2016. It uses local, European and international platforms to undertake advocacy work and to raise awareness on the issues faced by human rights defenders. It also undertakes country missions and publishes evidence-based reports. In 2016 GCHR published 13 reports including its annual report, two mission reports and two trial observation reports. It also organised 15 training workshops for human rights defenders and assisted in the provision of grants to nine human rights defenders.

GCHR was able to increase its advocacy and support to men and women human rights defenders – including independent lawyers, academics, journalists and online activists - from the Gulf region, with an emphasis on building their capacity to carry out their own documentation and advocacy, while building a communal space for activism.

GCHR has been able to tailor innovative strategies and developed methodologies to sustain a network for human rights defenders and civil society. For the human rights defenders, the network provides the tools and skills necessary to fulfill their capacity, to connect them across borders and to support peer-learning. For us, it leverages the protection when possible and allows us to advocate on their behalf when necessary. Networking with other local and international NGOs and coalitions increases the efficacy of GCHR's advocacy, particularly through UN and European Union advocacy – which are also linked to protection and support for human rights defenders at risk.

GCHR provides direct support to human rights defenders in the region, facilitating emergency requests for assistance (medical support, training, security, trial observation, evacuation etc.) As violations mount, GCHR has increased its coverage and support to women human rights defenders in the MENA region, through international partnerships, capacity building training, networking, research reports and joint advocacy, as well as emergency medical, legal and evacuation support. In addition to providing skills and capacity building, training workshops provide valuable networking opportunities. We have a vision of connecting social movements, fighting sectarianism/division and creating space to find common ground.

Through an evaluation carried out in late 2016 and early 2017, GCHR received a lot of positive feedback about its work, as well as suggestions for how to work more effectively and strategically going forward.

"GCHR is the only organisation that covers the Gulf region — you get some coverage in other countries like Bahrain and Kuwait — but no organisation covers the whole region equally." – Human rights defender.

"GCHR is meeting a real need in the region. They are connected. They know HRDs in the region. They have a good platform to advance rights in the region with this combination. The people that are working there are trustworthy people. I really trust the information, I can witness their commitment to help and defend HRDs in the region. Most importantly, if they say something, they do it." — Partner

II. INTRODUCTION

This is the fifth Annual Report of the Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR), an independent non-governmental organisation (NGO) founded by human rights defenders from the Gulf Region in 2011. GCHR documents the environment in which human rights defenders work in the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member states (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates), as well as Iran, Iraq, Yemen and Syria. This report, “See their Struggle, Realise their Rights,” outlines GCHR’s work over the course of 2016 and the main issues faced by human rights defenders in the Gulf region and neighbouring countries as they carry out their peaceful and legitimate work for the promotion and protection of human rights activities. It also provides recommendations to increase their safety.

In 2016, human rights defenders in the Gulf region and neighbouring countries worked in an increasingly hostile and dangerous environment. Conflicts continued in Syria, Iraq and Yemen throughout the year, leaving human rights defenders and civilians facing atrocities by all parties to the conflict. Restrictions on the rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly remain a serious issue throughout the countries in which GCHR works. Those who report on human rights issues or simply express an opinion, including independent lawyers, academics, journalists, bloggers and online activists, are subjected to intimidation, arrest, detention, lengthy prison sentences and even assassination as a result of their writings. Legislation too, is increasingly used to curtail this most basic right, in particular anti-cybercrime laws and anti-terrorist legislation. More generally human right defenders continue to be targeted by the authorities through means of threats, judicial harassment, arrest, detention, intimidation tactics, and smear campaigns. Many human rights defenders remained missing or in detention, often in appalling conditions, at the end of 2016. Despite this difficult backdrop in which they work, human rights defenders continue to bravely promote and protect human rights.

a) GCHR Activities and Achievements

Through its activities GCHR aims to provide human rights defenders with the support and advocacy they require to promote and protect human rights without fear for their safety. To this end, GCHR undertakes advocacy work at an international, regional and national level. Throughout 2016, in addition to 13 reports, it issued 66 appeals, 19 joint appeals and letters, 23 updates and 10 news alerts on cases of human rights defenders in the Gulf region and neighbouring countries. It provided 15 training workshops to over 200 human rights defenders throughout the year on topics ranging from digital security, UN mechanisms, human rights reporting, and psychological rehabilitation for women victims of violence. GCHR undertook missions to five countries and carried out trial observations in four of them, while also securing emergency support and grants to assist nine human rights defenders. GCHR works closely with partner organisations to carry out human rights activities and to ensure that it offers the best support to human rights defenders. In 2016 it strengthened its partnerships with CIVICUS, FIDH, IFEX, the WHRD International Coalition and the WHRD MENA Coalition, and undertook research for CIVICUS Monitor.

Monitoring and Publicising Cases of Human Rights Defenders at Risk

On a daily basis, GCHR monitors cases of violations against human rights defenders, including lawyers, journalists, bloggers and online activists, who report on human rights violations, in the region and publicises them widely. Since 2011, the GCHR research team has taken up more than 500 cases of human rights defenders and journalists at risk from Syria, Bahrain, Iraq, Iran, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar, UAE, and Yemen. Over 1560 appeals have been issued. These cases have been widely delivered as appeals or urgent actions to a distribution list of over 2500 contacts in the targeted countries and abroad. This includes the national, regional, and international mechanisms including the UN system. Cases are publicised on our website as well as on Facebook and Twitter. The aim is to create public support for those human rights defenders who are at risk and an awareness of their plights. See: www.gc4hr.org, @gulfcentre4hr <https://www.facebook.com/gc4hr/>

United Nations Advocacy

Throughout 2016, GCHR continued to actively engage with the UN human rights system. At the 31st session of the UN Human Rights Council (HRC), GCHR in co-operation with CIVICUS, Human Rights Watch and FIDH held a side event, entitled "[Civil Society Curtailed in Saudi Arabia & Qatar](#)", on 09 March 2016. During the event the findings of the GCHR reports "Qatar, civil society and human rights: Lack of civil society space hinders work of human rights defenders" and "Silenced Voices: The legal targeting of human rights defenders in Saudi Arabia" were set out. (See more below for details of the reports.)

At another [side event](#), held on 13 March 2016, the report "Syrian Human Rights Defenders Losing Hope with International Community as Human Rights Violations Continue Unabated" was launched. The report documents the three types of human rights defenders most at risk: Lawyers face mayhem in non-existent judicial procedures; journalists face restrictions on telling the truths in a chaotic media sector, and humanitarian workers face difficulties due to the lack of access into areas in dire need.

At the 32nd session, held from 13 June-01 July, GCHR jointly organised a panel discussion on the human rights and humanitarian situation in Yemen. Participants at the panel, entitled "[Under Fire: human rights defenders, journalists, and civilian casualties](#)", called for greater protection for those on the ground in Yemen. The panel was organised with Mwatana organisation for Human Rights, GCHR, the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS), Human Rights Watch, the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders: the World organisation Against Torture (OMCT) and the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), CIVICUS, and the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ).

GCHR also delivers oral interventions at the UNHCR as part of comprehensive responses to act of intimidation reprisals in the field of human rights. For example, in September 2016, **Maryam Al-Khawaja** delivered an oral intervention on Reprisals against Human Rights Defenders. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jmkMMQ7OyaA&feature=youtu.be>.

As a result of GCHR's Advocacy at the UN, resolutions have been passed on Bahrain, for example. A partner said, "The joint statement we delivered six times, led by the Swiss and joined by 24 other countries. It sent a very strong message to the Bahrain government and mitigated its behaviour for a while. This initiative was created in large part by the Swiss — because of its cooperation with Maryam — and we were able to keep it on the UN agenda for a substantial amount of time."

During GCHR's evaluation, a donor said, "There is now a consciousness and knowledge that the Gulf is not spared from human rights violations. GCHR is one of the few organisations that has been able to emphasize that — especially within UN system. GCHR hosted quite a few successful side events to help solidify this knowledge and I am sure there has been an impact on specific cases. GCHR's contributions can be attributed to the fact that there are still people who can recall the cases they work on and they have actually gotten people out of prison."

Missions

During 2016, GCHR staff and international human rights lawyers undertook five missions to four different countries. These country missions included a mission to UAE from 24-26 September, to Bahrain from 28-31 October, to Oman from 3-7 November, to Kuwait from 19-25 November and a second mission to Bahrain from 26-28 December. The purpose of these missions was to meet with human right defenders and organisations with a view to obtaining information and documenting cases of human rights defenders and the challenges they face as well as the human rights situation and civil society space more generally in the country visited.

Special Reports

In February, GCHR launched its [fourth annual report](#) in which it outlined its work and the issues faced by human rights defenders over the course of 2015. It published 12 other reports during 2016.

In March 2016, it published a Mission Report on Qatar, "[Qatar, civil society and human rights: Lack of civil space hinders work of human rights defenders](#)" which examined the lack of civil society space and the human rights problems in Qatar. The country has been subject to significant criticism for its treatment of migrant workers and women as well as those who attempt to speak out against the state. In spite of these abuses there has been very little oppositional reaction from civil society in Qatar. This report examines the lack of civil society space, especially as it relates to human rights defenders.

Following its mission to Syria in late 2015, a Mission Report "[Syrian Human Rights Defenders Losing Hope with International Community as Human Rights Violations Continue](#)" was published. It depicted the stories of human rights defenders in war-torn Syria and highlighted how journalists, lawyers and human rights defenders work in an extremely difficult and dangerous environment. The report made recommendations for support to human rights defenders.

Two reports were issued on Saudi Arabia by GCHR in 2016. In April a report "[Silenced Voices: Judicial targeting of human rights defenders in Saudi Arabia](#)" was published. It reported on the systematic targeting of human rights defenders and the tactics used by the authorities to silence activists, including the imposition of travel bans, arbitrary detention, defamation, legal intimidation and prosecution and lengthy sentencing, fines and flogging.

"[Special Report: Torture in Saudi Arabia](#)" was published in the context of the second review of Saudi Arabia by the UN Committee Against Torture (UN CAT). Since its initial review in 2002, Saudi Arabia has modified its legislation with the alleged aim of bringing it in line with international obligations. Despite this it continues to fall short of these obligations and torture remains a serious issue.

In June, a report [“Iraqi Kurdistan: Women Human Rights Defenders Challenging a Continuum of Violence”](#) demonstrated the situation for women human rights defenders who face gender-specific threats and violence in addition to the same types of risk faced by human rights defenders throughout the Gulf region and neighbouring countries. The report was based on information gathered in January 2016, when GCHR conducted research in Iraqi Kurdistan, meeting women human rights defenders and organisations working on women’s issues in Erbil, Dohuk and Sulaimanyia, with the purpose of understanding the situation for women defenders operating in the region, to publicise the difficulties that they face, and offer solidarity and support for their work.

In August, a [“Special Report on Torture in Kuwait”](#) was published in advance of the third review of Kuwait by the UN CAT at its 58th session in Geneva. The report presented some of the issues and cases of human rights defenders. It also emphasized the restrictions on freedom of expression and the use of the judicial system to attack human rights defenders, in particular Bedoon activists, as the plight of the ‘stateless’ Bedoon community, who account for approximately 180,000 of the population, remains unresolved.

The same month, GCHR published a report on reprisals. In [“Liberty at Risk: Reprisals Against Human Rights Defenders in the Gulf Region and Neighboring Countries”](#). It set out cases of human rights defenders who have been subjected to reprisals including threats, detention and travel bans, as a result of their co-operation and engagement with international human rights systems including UN bodies.

In September, GCHR launched a [report highlighting the cases of killings](#), attacks and threats against journalists and other media workers in Bahrain, Iraq, Syria and Yemen. Journalists are caught in the crossfire of conflicts in these countries and have been directly targeted for their activities in defense of human rights by governments, armed extremists and militant groups. These attacks have been met with impunity leaving journalists working in all countries at grave risk.

In October, GCHR launched [“Before it’s too late: A Preliminary Inquiry: Tangible Protection Mechanisms for Women Human Rights Defenders in the MENA Region and Beyond Capacity Building and Safety Training”](#). The report aimed to initiate a discussion around various thematic areas, including the definition of women human rights defenders (WHRDs) and how these relate to definitions used by UN mechanisms, including by the UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders. The report, based on interviews with WHRDs working on the region and beyond as well as research and analysis, was supported by CIVICUS and contributions were made by GCHR’s partner feminist and women’s organisations. This report investigates current trends and threats facing WHRDs in the MENA region and beyond and by focusing on the adaptability and mitigation measures often taken by these women to protect themselves within restrictive spaces and hazardous domains. The report suggested a set of recommendations directed at different stakeholders.

The same month, a report [“Let them speak- Media and freedom of expression targeted in Yemen”](#) was published. It documented the cases of those who have been subjected to human rights violations as they bravely report on and attempt to bring attention to the situation in Yemen.

GCHR issued three Trial Observation Reports from Oman, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates, which demonstrated that the trials fell well below international fair trial standards.

Also, GCHR in coordination with the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders (FIDH-OMCT), the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI) and Front Line Defenders, organised two trial observation missions to monitor the ongoing case of GCHR's Founding Director **Nabeel Rajab** in Bahrain, who remains in jail in violation of his right to free expression. Trial observers were able to monitor the hearings on 31 October 2016 and [28 December 2016](#). On 28 December, Rajab was temporarily released "following a failure to give any basis or any sufficient evidence of a link between him and the Twitter account with respect to the Yemeni and Jaw prison tweets;" however he was immediately re-arrested in another case.

GCHR led a coalition of groups to submit an appeal to the UN and monitor the trial of academic [Dr. Nasser Bin Ghaith](#), on trial for critical tweets, in the United Arab Emirates. The coalition supporting Dr. Bin Ghaith consists of GCHR, ANHRI; the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS); FIDH and OMCT, within the framework of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders; Front Line Defenders; Human Rights Watch; International Service for Human Rights (ISHR); and Scholars at Risk. Security officers in civilian clothes arrested Dr. Bin Ghaith in Abu Dhabi on 18 August 2015. At Dr. Bin Ghaith's trial on 27 September 2016, court officials prevented a United Kingdom-based lawyer from entering the court to observe the trial on behalf of the coalition. He remains in prison to this date, despite his case being transferred to a Federal Appeal Court.

A trial observation mission also took place to observe the trial of [Azam newspaper](#) journalists in Oman which took place from 04 to 07 November 2016. GCHR was part of a coalition group, together with ANHRI, Front Line Defenders, Reporters Without Borders (RSF), FIDH and the World organisation Against Torture (OMCT) within the framework of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders. The sentences of the journalists were later reduced.

Another trial observation report was published on the case of blogger [Sara Al-Drees](#) in Kuwait, following a hearing on 24 November 2016. The coalition of human rights groups which monitored the trial was composed of GCHR, ANHRI, International Service for Human Rights (ISHR), and FIDH and the OMCT within the framework of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders. Al-Drees faces up to five years in jail for a tweet.

Emergency Support and Grants

GCHR further developed its working relationship with the European Union in 2016 and participated in two EU meetings in Brussels: the EU-CSO Forum and the meeting of the EU Relocation of Human rights defenders Platform. GCHR is a lead partner in the EU's regional protection efforts. We managed to evacuate many human rights defenders to safe places and secured grants for others. In GCHR's evaluation a human rights defender said, "We are working in a very difficult situation — dealing with internal and external war. For us it is very good to know that the GCHR will be at our back — we feel safer because of this because we know we have friends and they actually care about us if something happens."

Over the course of 2016, GCHR assisted in the provision of grants to nine human rights defenders in five Gulf Countries; with the support of Euro-Mediterranean Foundation of Support to Human Rights Defenders (EMHRF), FIDH, the United Nations, Freedom House and International Media Support (IMS).

Training workshops

In 2016, GCHR organised 15 training workshops for over two hundred men and women human rights defenders. These included a workshop on safety and security for human rights defenders and journalists in Bahrain in January; five workshops in Iraq on capacity building, digital security training, human rights journalism training, and two on training on psychological rehabilitation for women victims of violence; a training workshop held in Egypt in January for Syrians on well-being and stress management; and a capacity building workshop for lawyers on the use of UN mechanism for human rights held in February. Seven different workshops were held over the course of the year in Lebanon - three by the Women's Network Workshop for WHRDs, two on the Safety and Security of Journalists in Syria and two on Digital Security.

Networking and International Partnerships

GCHR works with other NGOs in the Middle East and internationally carrying out advocacy initiatives and capacity building training. For example, GCHR carries out capacity building training in partnership with Maharat Foundation, and works with Nazra Centre for Feminist Studies in Egypt on mutual networking efforts, including the Women's Human Rights Defenders MENA Coalition, which has an office in Lebanon. In 2016, GCHR continued its partnership with the Rafto Foundation for Human Rights to provide capacity building and training workshop for the Women's Network. GCHR is also a member of CIVICUS, FIDH, IFEX and the WHRD International Coalition.

In 2016, GCHR became a partner carrying out research for the [CIVICUS Monitor](#), the first-ever online tool to track and compare civic freedoms on a global scale. The Monitor, which was launched on 24th October 2016, provides up to the minute information on civic space across the globe and rates countries based on how well they uphold the three fundamental rights that enable people to act collectively and make change: freedom of association, freedom of peaceful assembly, and freedom of expression. GCHR monitors Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Syria, Iran, Iraq and Yemen. In the countries covered by GCHR, these fundamental rights are regularly violated by States.

GCHR is also an active member of several working groups that include leading human rights organisations, working collaboratively to effect change in countries such as Syria, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain, Yemen and Iraq. These working groups are aimed at taking immediate actions to address some chronic challenges faced by human rights defenders in the Middle East.

b) Country Summaries

BAHRAIN

The crackdown against human rights defenders in Bahrain was relentless in 2016 with freedom of expression, freedom of assembly and freedom of movement being particularly targeted. Human rights defenders face judicial harassment, arrest and detention, poor conditions and ill-treatment in detention. Travel bans were placed on human rights defenders throughout the year in an attempt to hinder their activities. Authorities banned human rights defenders from travelling to the UNHRC sessions in an attempt to curtail their international advocacy work. While 2016 saw the eventual release of **Zainab Al-Khawaja** and **Ghada Jamsheer**, their arrest, detention and the charges brought against them are evidence of the targeting they faced by authorities as a result of the exercise of their right to freedom of expression. At the close of 2016, many human rights defenders, including prominent human rights defender Nabeel Rajab - who was arrested in June, remain in detention on trumped up charges. GCHR issued a total of 30 appeals, joint appeals and updates on Bahrain in 2016.

IRAN

Human rights defenders in Iran continued to operate in a threatening environment in 2016. Freedom of expression, association, peaceful assembly and movement continued to be curtailed. Women human rights defenders faced arrest, detention and long prison sentences as a result of their work in the defence of women's rights. Women's rights activist and lawyer **Narges Mohammadi** was sentenced to 16 years in prison and remains in detention despite her failing health. Women's and students' rights activist **Bahareh Hedayat** was finally released after being arrested in 2009, and Professor **Homa Hoodfar** was detained for 100 days in 2016. A total of eight appeals were issued by GCHR on Iran in 2016.

IRAQ

Human rights defenders carry out their work under threat of attack, harassment, arbitrary detention and even death. Journalists and those exercising their right to freedom of expression are increasingly targeted. Following a mission to the country in January GCHR published a report "Iraqi Kurdistan: Women Human Rights Defenders Challenging a Continuum of Violence", in which it examined the situation of women human rights defenders. Independent journalist **Afrah Shawki** was kidnapped on 26 December 2016 from her home in Baghdad by a group of armed men and held for a week. GCHR issued five appeals on Iraq, four of which related to the plight of journalists.

KUWAIT

Freedom of expression remains seriously restricted in Kuwait and bloggers and human rights defenders are subjected to arrest, detention and lengthy sentences. Authorities invoke vague provisions of the new Cyber Crime legislation against those exercising their right to freedom of expression online. The Bedoon community continued to be oppressed in 2016 and those promoting their rights were targeted by the authorities. GCHR published a report "Torture in Kuwait", as Kuwait underwent its third review at the 58th session of the UN CAT. It issued 12 appeals, updates and news pieces on Kuwait in 2016 including five on the case of Bedoon rights activist **Abdulhakim Al-Fadhli**.

OMAN

During 2016, freedom of expression continued to be seriously curtailed in Oman as the Internal Security Service (ISS) systematically targeted media outlets, journalists and online activists. GCHR issued 13 appeals and updates on the case of the *Azamn* newspaper and the three journalists **Ibrahim Al-Maamari**, **Yousef Al-Haj** and **Zaher Al-Abri**. Other independent publications such as *Mowaten* and *Al-Balad* also ceased operating due to the increasingly hostile and dangerous environment for media and online writers. Human rights defender **Saed Jadad** was released in August having served a one-year sentence in dire conditions which threatened his health, while writer and online activist **Abdullah Habib** was sentenced to three years in prison in November 2016. A total of 28 appeals, two updates and one joint letter were issued by GCHR during 2016.

QATAR

A GCHR report found that there is a lack of civil society space in Qatar. In particular migrant workers' rights, women's rights, freedom of expression and access to justice continue to be serious human rights problems that remain unaddressed. Three appeals and news articles were issued on Qatar in 2016, including on the release of poet **Mohamed Rashid Al-Ajami**, after five years in prison for a poem.

SAUDI ARABIA

Human rights in Saudi Arabia continued to be grossly violated throughout 2016 and human rights defenders and NGOs targeted, with freedom of association severely limited. They face threats, arbitrary arrest and detention; those in detention are kept in poor conditions; human rights organisations are frequently shut down or not granted permission to be established. Freedom of expression is seriously curtailed and activists targeted due to their online postings. The GCHR website continued to be blocked in Saudi Arabia in 2016. The crackdown on members of the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association (ACPRA) continued as members were handed down lengthy prison sentences. Saudi Arabia was reviewed by the 57th session of the UN Committee Against Torture (CAT) and GCHR submitted a report outlining the situation facing human rights defenders. It published a briefing paper "Silenced Voices: Judicial targeting of human rights defenders in Saudi Arabia" as Saudi Arabia underwent its Mid-Term Reporting. In addition to the report, a total of 13 appeals were issued on over 20 human rights defenders.

SYRIA

Human rights defenders in Syria continue to be a target for all sides of the conflict. The widespread insecurity, constant fear and normalisation of violence make the lives of human rights defenders extremely hard and high risk. Many are in detention, have been disappeared or are on trial before military and anti-terrorism courts. Despite international campaigns, **Razan Zaitouneh** and other members of the Violations Documentation Centre (VDC), **Samira Al-Khalil**, **Wa'el Hamada** and **Nazim Hammadi** - collectively known as the "Douma Four," as well as human rights defenders **Bassel Khartabil** and **Khalil Ma'touq**, remain disappeared. GCHR issued ten appeals on Syria in 2016, including two joint appeals on the cases of Khalil Ma'touq and the Douma Four.

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

Human rights in the UAE continue to be restricted. The plight of the UAE94 was on-going throughout the year as dozens of human rights defenders remained in detention in poor conditions. After over eight months of incommunicado detention, during which time he was subjected to torture, human rights defender **Dr. Nasser Bin Ghaith** was brought before the courts on trumped up charges. GCHR made a UN submission and sent an observer to monitor his trial, which has been in breach of fair trial procedures, is still on-going and he remains in detention. GCHR issued ten appeals, updates and news items on UAE in 2016, six of which related to the case of Nasser Bin Ghaith and other UAE94 activists, including two joint appeals.

YEMEN

Yemen is plagued by internal and regional conflicts, poverty, humanitarian crises and a legacy of human rights violations. Serious violations and abuses of international law are rampant and have continued since the civil war began in 2014. In 2016, GCHR co-organised and participated in a side event at the UNHRC on Yemen, and published a report "Let Them Speak: Media and Freedom of Expression targeted in Yemen". It was a signatory of a joint letter to UN Member States outlining the human rights violations committed by all sides and calling for the international, independent investigation into civilian deaths and injuries in Yemen. Journalist **Mohammed Al-Abbsi** died in prison from poisoning. GCHR issued four press releases and reports on Yemen in 2016.

III. COUNTRY REPORTS

BAHRAIN

In 2016, the authorities continued to target human rights defenders. They faced harassment, arrest, detention and travel bans as a result of their work.

Freedom of movement was particularly restricted in 2016 as those engaging in international advocacy were forbidden from leaving the country to attend human rights events including the UNHRC sessions. Several appeals were issued on the cases of Zainab Al-Khawaja and Ghada Jamsheer following their arrests and eventual release, as well as the case of Nabeel Rajab who continues to be targeted by authorities as a result of his peaceful human rights work.

On 01 January 2016, GCHR issued an appeal on the case of human rights defender and journalist **Mahmoud Abdul-Ridha Al-Jazeera** who was taken from his home during a raid by security forces. His arrest came a day after he wrote an article for *Al-Wasaf* newspaper reporting on the consultative (Shura) council's session, during which a member of parliament asked the authorities to punish Bahrainis who had their citizenship revoked on political grounds by depriving them of government housing. He was charged with allegedly supporting terrorism, inciting hatred of the regime, having contacts with a foreign country, and seeking to overthrow the regime by joining Al-Wafa and the February 14 Youth Movement. He was subjected to ill-treatment in detention including being blindfolded and not being allowed to sit or sleep for almost three days. He remains in detention and if found guilty he faces the possibility of a life sentence and his citizenship being revoked.

On 07 January 2016, the Court of Appeal acquitted prominent human rights defender **Mohammed Al-Maskati**. The Court overturned a six-month sentence handed down by the Lower Criminal Court on charges of allegedly “rioting and participating in an illegal gathering.” Al-Maskati works for Front Line Defenders and is founder and former president of the Bahrain Youth Society for Human Rights (BYSHR) as well as an active participant in activities of the Human Rights Council.

BYSHR Board member **Naji Fateel** remains in prison since he was sentenced to 15 years in 2013 for his human rights work. On 25 January 2016, Fateel was sentenced by the High Criminal court to an additional 15-year term for allegedly inciting disturbances by prisoners in Jaw prison in March 2015. The Court of Appeal reduced the sentence to 10 years, leaving him with combined sentences of 25 years in prison.

On 05 January, human rights defender **Maytham Al-Salman**, Head of the Religious Freedom Unit of the Bahrain Human Rights Observatory, was summoned to the Criminal Investigations Directorate (CID). He was questioned about a speech he gave at a meeting on 27 December regarding the continuing detention of Bahraini opposition leader Sheikh Ali Salman, before being released without charge. The same week Dr. **Saeed Al-Samahiji** was arrested at home and detained for one week in connection with postings he made on social media condemning the execution of 47 prisoners in Saudi Arabia. Both men had previously been arrested and detained for exercising their right to freedom of expression.

2016 saw the continued targeting of human rights defender Nabeel Rajab. Nabeel Rajab is Founding Director of GCHR, President of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights (BCHR), former Deputy Secretary General of the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) and on the Advisory Committee of Human Rights Watch’s Middle East Division.

On 21 January, GCHR was one of 280 human rights organisations that wrote to the King of Bahrain asking him to lift the travel ban on Nabeel Rajab so that he could travel abroad to secure medical assistance for his wife. The travel ban was imposed against him without judicial determination in July 2015 and was based on freedom of speech-related charges.

The imposition of prison sentences on human rights defenders continued during January and February. In January women’s rights defender Ghada Jamsheer was sentenced to an additional four months in prison in connection with posting on Twitter. On 02 February a nine-month prison sentence was upheld *in absentia* against Zainab Al-Khawaja, for trying to visit her father in prison while he was on hunger strike. The next day a three-month jail sentence was upheld against photographer **Ahmed Al-Fardan** and he was arrested to begin his sentence.

Zainab Al-Khawaja continued to be targeted throughout the first half of 2016. She is a prominent human rights defender who has campaigned tirelessly for the release of her father, prominent human rights defender and co-founder of GCHR **Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja**, who is currently serving a life-sentence in the notorious Jaw Prison as a result of his human rights activities. She was sentenced to a total of three years and one month in prison, on a variety of charges including two sentences for ripping a picture of Bahrain’s monarch, and one year in prison for allegedly “insulting” a police officer.

On 14 March 2016, Zainab Al-Khawaja was arrested by a group of riot police and plain-clothes police at her home. She was taken, together with her 15-month-old son to Al-Hooraa police station, then to the Ministry of the Interior and then to Isa Town Women's Prison. Her son was denied food and water during the first day of detention and both were held in poor conditions. Her arrest came just after her sister, Maryam Al-Khawaja, then Co-Director of GCHR, had attended the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva.

The spokesperson for the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Rupert Colville, said, "We are deeply troubled by the arrest ... of the social media activist and human rights defender, Zainab Al-Khawaja, who was detained along with her one-and-a-half year old son. Ms. Al-Khawaja was previously convicted on a number of charges, including insulting the King. Her father [Abdulahadi Al-Khawaja], who co-founded the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights (BCHR), has been in jail since 2011, serving a life sentence." The statement also mentioned Nabeel Rajab.

UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, **Michel Forst**, also criticised the arrest of Zainab Al-Khawaja, who he said "is detained purely for her critical views against government authorities." He noted "such criticism is not only fully legitimate according to Bahrain's obligations under human rights law. It is absolutely essential to the free and public debate necessary for a vibrant civil society." Forst urged the Bahraini government to stop the ongoing harassment and criminalisation of activists in Bahrain and he expressed his concerns about the general situation for human rights defenders and in particular the restriction on the right to freedom of expression. Forst's statement was endorsed by the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, **David Kaye**.

On 19 March, human rights defender **Salah Al-Khawaja**, brother of Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja was released from prison having served a five-year sentence on charges related to his peaceful human rights activities.

In April 2016, Zainab Al-Khawaja was designated as "Their freedom is their right" campaign prisoner of the month. As well, GCHR led a Thunderclap campaign joined by over 30 international human rights organisations and hundreds of individuals as well as reaching over 1.4 million on social media. It called for the release of Zainab Al-Khawaja and her convictions to be quashed.

On 9 May 2016, a spokesperson from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that Zainab Al-Khawaja and a Russian female prisoner would be released as foreign nationals on humanitarian ground because of their children. This followed a statement made on 07 April 2016 after her arrest on 14 March 2016 by the Foreign Minister during a press conference with US Secretary of State John Kerry, in which he said that Zainab Al-Khawaja would be released.

On 10 May 2016, eight international NGOs wrote to the Swiss Minister of Foreign Affairs expressing concern over the King of Bahrain's first State Visit to Switzerland. It urged the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Didier Burkhalter, to call for the release of Zainab Al-Khawaja, and to make human rights the centre of the Bahrain State Visit.

Later that month, Zainab Al-Khawaja became ill and was unable to care for her son. The prison administration did not allow her husband or her mother to take the child. On 31 May 2016, Zainab Al-Khawaja was finally released. She was told that she should immediately leave the country with her family or risk being imprisoned indefinitely. She arrived in Denmark, where she is a dual citizen, on 06 June 2016.

On 13 June 2016, Nabeel Rajab, was arrested by police led by the Cybercrime Unit. Dozens of police officers surrounded his home, confiscated his personal belongings and took him into detention. His arrest relates to charges of spreading false news and rumours about the internal situation in an attempt to tarnish the reputation of Bahrain, a charge linked to statements given by Rajab during television interviews in early 2015 and 2016. During his detention, previous charges were revived for allegedly “offending a foreign country” (Saudi Arabia) for tweets critical of Bahrain’s participation in Saudi Arabia-led military operations in Yemen, which according to the United Nations, have so far been responsible for the deaths of thousands of civilians. In addition, he faces charges for “offending national institutions,” for comments about the alleged torture of inmates in Bahrain’s Jaw Prison in March 2015. He faces up to 15 years in prison in these cases.

Early in August, authorities postponed urgent hospital appointments for Rajab, which GCHR described as “nothing short of an attempt to break Nabeel down psychologically and physically.” On 3 October 2016, Rajab underwent surgery to remove his gallbladder and was returned to unsanitary conditions in prison shortly thereafter, as well as having a hearing on 06 October.

GCHR issued further appeals for Rajab in September, October and December. He is held in poor conditions and suffers from a number of serious medical conditions, which are not being adequately treated. In September, he was announced as prisoner of the month in the “Their Freedom is their right” campaign. A hearing of his case related to the Yemen tweets and the Jaw Prison reports was postponed on 31 October until 15 December.

A joint trial observation mission, comprised of the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI), Front Line Defenders, GCHR, FIDH and the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT) within the framework of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, called for Rajab’s immediate and unconditional release. The case was further postponed on 15 December until 28 December when the Court decided to release him on bail for charges relating to posts on Twitter. However, he was immediately re-arrested in relation to television interviews given in 2015 and 2016. Following a second joint trial observation mission to attend Rajab’s trial on 28 December 2016, GCHR, Front Line Defenders, ANHRI, FIDH and OMCT called on the government of Bahrain to immediately release him and drop all charges against him. He remains in prison on several charges to this date despite numerous hearings and requests for bail.

Rajab’s arrest in June came as the 32nd session of the UNHRC opened in Geneva. The day before, Bahraini human rights defenders and victims of violations were prevented from flying to Geneva. Bahraini authorities imposed a travel ban on **Hussain Radhi** of BCHR, **Ebtisam Al-Saegh**, **Ebrahim Al-Demistani**, and the parents of **Ali Mushaima**, a victim of extrajudicial killing in 2011. The father of another victim of extrajudicial killing, **Sayed Hashim**, was stopped at King Fahd Causeway and told of the ban. GCHR together with 20 other human rights organisations issued a joint appeal calling for Rajab’s immediate release, the removal of travel bans and the cessation of reprisals against human rights defenders in Bahrain.

On 18 June 2016, human rights defender and writer **Abdulnabi Al-Ekry** was banned from traveling to Sharjah in the UAE from Bahrain International Airport. Al-Ekry is the former President of Bahrain Transparency Society and a member of the Bahrain Observatory for Human Rights and has a long history of working for human rights in Bahrain. He joins a long list of civil society members banned from travel in 2016, including around a dozen people who were prevented from attending the UN Human Rights Council's 32nd session. Dr. **Taha Al-Derazi**, a former political prisoner and activist, was also prevented from traveling to the UK with his wife. **Jalila Al-Salman**, vice president of the dissolved Bahrain Teachers Society, was not allowed to leave Bahrain when she attempted to travel to Oslo.

Journalist **Nazeeha Saeed** was banned from traveling at Bahrain International Airport on 29 June 2016. She works with France 24 and Radio Monte Carlo. In 2011 she had been detained and interrogated for 13 hours by police officials. She was accused of lying in her reports and "harming Bahrain's' image." She was also subjected to verbal and physical abuse, including being beaten with a hose and subjected to electric shocks, which constitute torture. Following the ordeal she identified five of the police officials who assaulted her, however only one female police officer, Sara Al-Moosa, was prosecuted but later acquitted. On 17 July 2016, Saeed was summoned to the Public Prosecution where Bahrain's Information Affairs Authority (IAA) accused her of allegedly "practising journalism without a permit." The IAA claims she had violated Article 88 of Law Decree 47/2002 that regulates the Press, Printing and Publication, because her permit has expired. It was the first time Saeed did not receive her permit.

On 1 July 2016, GCHR led a joint appeal, with ten other organisations, regarding the continued harassment of women human rights defenders and the case of writer, blogger, journalist and President of the Women's Petition Committee (WPC) Ghada Jamsheer. On 22 June 2016 she was sentenced on appeal to ten months in prison by the Second High Criminal Court for four charges related to her posts on Twitter about corruption at King Hamad hospital. There are 12 charges against her related to this case and she has already been sentenced to seven months in prison on three other related charges, in addition to one year in prison (suspended) on trumped up charges of "assaulting a police officer" while in custody.

GCHR led another joint appeal signed by 22 NGOs for Jamsheer on 16 November 2016, while she was detained at Isa Town Women's Prison. She was denied release on health grounds despite suffering from rheumatoid arthritis for which she was not receiving adequate treatment in detention. On 15 August she was detained in Manama airport as she arrived back from the UK and was handed down a combined ten-month sentence for exercising her right to freedom of expression in Twitter. On 12 December, Jamsheer was released, having spent four months in prison. She reached an agreement to work at a government appointed job for the rest of her ten month sentence, but to date has had no news of how to implement this condition. While welcoming her release, GCHR called for her sentence to be overturned and all charges against her to be dropped.

Further restriction on freedom of movement took place in July as travel bans continued to be imposed against human rights defenders. On 08 July, human rights lawyer **Mohammed Al-Tajer** was prevented from traveling to Saudi Arabia with no official confirmation or justification for the ban given. **Sharaf Al-Mosawi**, head of Bahrain Transparency Association, was also prevented from traveling to Saudi Arabia the same day, and **Zainab Al-Khamis**, a member of the Bahrain Human Rights Observatory (BHRO), was prevented from going to Kuwait.

In August, the crackdown on human rights defenders and freedom of expression continued. The government of Bahrain introduced further restriction over Internet use, centralizing website-blocking powers under Bahrain's Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (TRA).

Maytham Al-Salman, human rights defender and religious freedoms officer at BHRO, was summoned to appear on 14 August 2016 for interrogation before the security authorities in relation to his peaceful and legitimate human rights activities, including calling for Rajab to be released in a recent video. He was charged with "illegal gathering" and released on bail. Dr. **Taha Al-Derazi** was charged with the same offence. The charges relate to their peaceful assembly in the village of Duraz which has been blockaded by police since June after large-scale protests began, and are in violation of their right to freedom of assembly.

Travel bans continued throughout August. **Enas Oun** and Hussain Radhi of the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights (BCHR) Monitoring and Documentation team were both prevented from leaving the country.

On 30 August, GCHR issued an appeal as more human rights defenders were banned from travelling and prevented from engaging in UN advocacy. On the evening of 29 August 2016, **Nedal Al-Salman**, Head of International Relations for BCHR, was not permitted to leave the country on her way to the 33rd session of the UNHRC held in Geneva from 13-30 September 2016. Other human rights defenders who were prevented from leaving the country include **Ahmed Al-Saffar**, a member of the European Bahraini organisation for Human Rights (EBOHR), Ebtisam Al-Sayegh, a member of Salam organisation for Democracy and Human Rights, and **Essa Al-Ghayeb**, director of Lualua Center for Human Rights.

GCHR expressed serious concern at the statement issued by the Minister for Foreign Affairs who reportedly said, "[We will not pay attention to any voice which hustle us from abroad, especially UN Human Rights Council](#)," according to the news reports from Bahrain. This is particularly worrisome as Bahrain is up for review during the UN's Universal Periodic Review in 2017.

A GCHR appeal dated 19 November outlined the continued crackdown on freedom of expression and assembly. Over the course of a week in November, four staff members of the BCHR, Hussain Radhi, Nedal Al-Salman, Enas Oun, and Ahmad Al-Saffar were interrogated over their human rights activities. Mohammed Al-Tajer and Abdunabi Al-Ekry were also interrogated by authorities during November as the onslaught of reprisals against human rights defenders continued unabated.

IRAN

The rights of women human rights defenders in Iran remained seriously restricted throughout 2016 and those who fight for the promotion and protection of human rights were targeted by the authorities. In 2016, women human rights defenders were arrested and detained in poor conditions, most notably in the notorious Evin Prison where conditions are dire and prisoners are subjected to ill-treatment on a daily basis. While 2016 did see the release of some human rights defenders following international pressure, the human rights situation in the country remains critical.

On 15 February 2016, children's rights activist **Atena Daemi** was released from prison although her 14-year sentence is still in effect. She was arrested in October 2014 by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and taken to Evin prison where she was held in solitary confinement for three months. In May 2015, after a trial that lasted 15 minutes she was sentenced to 14 years in jail. Atena Daemi worked tirelessly for children's rights and set up training classes for street children and organised painting exhibitions to raise awareness about the issue of street children in Iran. She also participated in demonstrations in solidarity with children in Kobani and Gaza. She paid 700 Million Tomans (approximately US\$232,000) to be released in February.

Sadly, Daemi was rearrested on 26 November 2016 to serve the rest of her sentence following an appeal. On 29 September 2016, the appeals court reduced her punishment on the charge of "insulting the Supreme Leader" from three to two years and the charge of "assembly and collusion against national security" from seven to five years. She was brutally rearrested on 26 November 2016 to resume serving her sentence, and is now facing new charges based on her filing a complaint about the unnecessary force to which she and her family were subjected during her arrest.

On 03 May 2016, World Press Freedom Day, GCHR welcomed the news that Iranian cartoonist and women's human rights defender **Atena Farghadani** had been released from Evin prison. She was acquitted of charges of undermining national security, and a three-year prison sentence for insulting the Supreme Leader (Ayatollah Ali Khamenei) was suspended after a Court of Appeal hearing in April 2016.

In November 2014, Farghadani was arrested on charges including allegedly "insulting members of parliament," whom she depicted as animals in a cartoon criticizing a draft law aimed at restricting access to birth control, and was sentenced to 12 years in prison on 01 June 2015. While in detention she suffered from ill health and poor treatment in prison. She carried out a hunger strike in protest against the treatment of prisoners. She received the Cartoonist Rights Network (CRNI)'s 2015 Courage in Editorial Cartooning Award and Index on Censorship listed her among its 100 free expression heroes in 2016.

On 18 May 2016, women's rights activist and lawyer Narges Mohammadi was sentenced to a total of 16 years in prison for her human rights activities. Charges included "membership in the [now banned] Step by Step to Stop the Death Penalty" group, for "taking part in assembly and collusion against national security" and "committing propaganda against the state." She has been in Evin Prison since her arrest in May 2015. She suffers from ill health, which is deteriorating further due to the poor conditions and treatment in prison. She spent time in prison in 2012 but was released due to health reasons and GCHR expresses serious concern for her well being. She was Vice-President of the Defenders of Human Rights Centre and President of the Executive Committee of the National Council of Peace in Iran. She was awarded the Per Anger Prize in 2011 by the Swedish government for her human rights work, and the "City of Paris" medal in May 2016 for her human rights writing.

On 27 June, Mohammadi started a hunger strike to protest not being allowed to phone her children and husband, human rights defender **Taghi Rahmani**, who live in Paris. She ended the hunger strike on 16 July when she was allowed to have phone contact with her children. On 28 September 2016, her sentence was upheld by the Court of Appeal. Three appeals were issued on her case by GCHR.

On 26 May 2016, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention (UNWGAD) issued an [opinion](#) on the case of human rights defender Bahareh Hedayat, which GCHR welcomed. It concluded that her imprisonment since 2009 was arbitrary and against international law and demanded her immediate release. The sentences comprised of two years for "insulting the Supreme Leader," six months for "insulting the President," five years for "acting against national security and publishing falsehoods," as well as an additional two years imprisonment (suspended) for "acting against national security through holding a protest gathering for women". In addition to the decision by the UNWGAD that her detention is arbitrary, Article 134 of Iran's new Islamic Penal Code provided for her release after serving her longest sentence, namely five years. She is one of the founders of the "One Million Signatures Campaign for the Change of Discrimination Laws Against Women" and has a high public profile having given interviews to national and international media on the human rights situation in Iran. She worked bravely for the rights of women and students in Iran and continued to write inspirational letters to human rights activists when in prison. She was finally released after 2,410 days in prison in September 2016. While GCHR welcomed her release it also called for her to be protected from any act of reprisal and for her freedom of expression to be respected following her release.

On 23 September GCHR issued an appeal on the case of Professor Homa Hoodfar, a Canadian-Iranian academic who was arrested on 6 June 2016. In March 2016 her home had been raided and her passports confiscated a day before she was due to fly to London. Following the raid she was repeatedly summoned for interrogation before being arrested and taken to Evin Prison where she spent 112 days in detention.

Hoodfar is a professor of social anthropology at Concordia University in Montreal, Canada. She has published several studies on gender and development, Islamic family law, women's political participation and the importance of women's participation in society. She has also contributed her expertise to research-based networks such as Women Living Under Muslim Laws and Shirkat Gah. Following deterioration in her health and after much international pressure she was released on 26 September 2016 and was allowed to leave Iran.

On 2 October 2016, detained journalist **Issa Saharkhiz** started a hunger strike in protest against his detention despite suffering from heart disease. Under Articles 502 and 522 of the Criminal Code a prisoner can qualify for conditional release on grounds of ill-health. Saharkhiz was first arrested on 2 November 2015 with three other journalists and accused of being part of a foreign plot to spread anti-Iranian propaganda. In September 2016, Branch 28 of the Revolutionary Court reduced Saharkhiz's sentence from three years in prison to 21 months after he was convicted on charges of "propaganda against the state" and "insulting the supreme leader."

[IRAQ](#)

The human rights situation in Iraq was critical during 2016, as the conflict continued and human rights violations were committed by all parties. Human rights defenders, including journalists and those exercising the right to freedom of expression, were met with harassment, threats and death in 2016. GCHR issued a report on the situation of women human rights defenders in Kurdistan which highlighted how they are subjected to gender-specific danger. Of the four appeals GCHR issued, three were based on cases of journalists who were targeted as a result of their peaceful and legitimate work.

In January 2016, GCHR undertook a mission to Erbil, Dohuk and Sulaimanyia in Iraqi Kurdistan. Based on the research conducted a report was published entitled “Iraqi Kurdistan: Women Human Rights Defenders Challenging a Continuum of Violence”. It outlined how women human rights defenders in that area face the same risks as other human rights defenders worldwide, but as women, they are also subject to gender-specific threats and violence. The mission also revealed the escalation of the crackdown on civil society in the region and the difficult environment in which these organisations operate. The report was dedicated to **Samira Saleh Al-Naimi**, a human rights lawyer who was publically executed by Daesh in Mosul in September 2014.

An appeal was issued on the case of journalist and head of the Iraqi Journalists’ Rights Defense Association (IJRDA), **Ibrahim Al-Saragey**. On 26 July 2016, the Iraqi Parliament threatened him with legal action if he did not formally apologise to the Parliament for statements he had made the previous day in which he described the Parliament as a profitable instead of legislative body, due to a proposed internal law of the Parliament which includes many privileges for its members. GCHR issued the appeal in solidarity with him and called on the Iraqi Parliament to refrain from targeting journalists and to respect freedom of expression.

In August 2016, journalist **Wedat Hussein Ali**, was found dead with torture marks on his body after he was abducted in the city of Duhok in Kurdistan. Following his death, the coordinator of the Metro Centre to Defend Journalists, a partner of GCHR, said “The chronic problem that we are facing in Kurdistan is impunity.” He added, “Four other journalists were killed before in our region and no one was brought to justice in relation to these crimes.”

At the end of the year, GCHR issued an appeal when independent journalist Afrah Shawki was kidnapped on 26 December 2016 from her home in Baghdad by a group of armed men. The men separated her from her three children and confiscated her personal belongings. It was alleged that the kidnapping was related to a recent article she published which called on the State to control both the unlawful use of weapons and illegal armed groups. She was released unharmed a week later.

KUWAIT

The Bedoon community, comprising over 150,000 people in Kuwait, are still denied citizenship and basic human rights and face on-going harassment by Kuwaiti authorities. Bedoon rights activists including Abdulhakim Al-Fadhli continue to be targeted. Freedom of expression remains severely curtailed. The year ended with the case of blogger **Sara Al-Drees** still on-going as she faces up to five years in prison for a post on Twitter.

On 21 January 2016, GCHR issued a joint appeal together with the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI), ARTICLE 19, International Service for Human Rights (ISHR), and Reporters Without Borders (RSF) about the impact of the new Cybercrime Law no. 63. The new law contains 21 articles which seek to regulate a number of online activists and to restrict freedom of expression on the Internet. In particular articles 4, 6 and 7 constitute overly broad restrictions in contravention of Article 19(3) of the UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).

The Bedoon community in Kuwait continued to be targeted throughout 2016.

Human rights defender **Rana Al-Sadoun**, co-founder of the National Committee to Monitor Violations (NCV) which monitors violations of freedom of expression, was arrested. She was released two days later on bail. On 21 June 2015, she was sentenced by the Criminal Court in Kuwait *in absentia* to three years in prison with hard labour. The court convicted her of repeating a speech which was delivered in 2002 by former MP Musallam Al-Barrak in which he criticised the electoral law. Al-Barrak is currently serving a two-year prison sentence because of this speech.

Bedoon activist Abdulhakim Al-Fadhli was subjected to arrest and detention over the course of the year. He is a prominent Bedoon rights activist and is involved in monitoring human rights violations in Kuwait. He has been arrested and detained on a number of occasions. GCHR issued five appeals on his case during 2016 and believes that he was targeted solely as a result of his legitimate and peaceful human rights activities. On 29 January 2015, the Criminal Court in Kuwait sentenced Al-Fadhli to one year in prison with hard labour followed by deportation for his participation in a demonstration calling for Bedoon rights.

On 18 April 2016, Al-Fadhli was arrested by security forces. His arrest took place at the house of detained politician Mussalam Al-Barrak, where a gathering to show solidarity was being held. On 16 May 2016, the Cassation Court ratified the sentence of deportation and a year in prison with labour. In June an appeal was issued for Al-Fadhli after he was beaten by policemen while being transferred from court to prison. At this hearing one of the charges was converted from a felony to a misdemeanor and so his one year sentence was suspended; however, he remained in detention for a three month- sentence issued in February on a charge of misuse of a mobile phone. He was released on 02 August 2016 having served this sentence. On 26 September, the Misdemeanours Appeal Court rejected his appeal against the other charge and upheld his sentence of one year in prison with labour followed by deportation. Al-Fadhli told GCHR: "I will serve the 8 months remaining from my one-year prison sentence but I will never give my consent to deportation."

In July 2016, GCHR issued a special report on "Torture in Kuwait" which aimed to present some of the issues and cases of human rights defenders as they relate to the violation of the UN Convention Against Torture and Other, Cruel Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. The report was published in the context of Kuwait's third review by the UN Committee Against Torture held at its 58th session which took place from 25-July to 12 August 2016. It outlined how human rights defenders in Kuwait continue to be targeted and subjected to judicial harassment, intimidation and ill treatment at the hands of the authorities. It also emphasised how legal provision criminalising torture and upholding fair procedures in legal cases, are often ignored in violation of the UN Convention.

In September, GCHR issued a statement following the death of prominent Kuwaiti human rights defender **Naser Al-Raas** in Canada. He was Executive Director of Salam for Human Rights and had been arrested in Bahrain in 2011 when visiting his sisters. He was tortured in detention in Bahrain and sentenced to five years in prison on charges relating to participation in peaceful protests. He was eventually allowed to leave the country and return to Canada in 2012. He died of heart problems at a young age.

GCHR issued two appeals on the case of blogger Sara Al-Drees. She is accused of allegedly defaming the Amir of Kuwait, violating the Cybercrimes Law and the misuse of a mobile phone in relation to the tweets that she published on her Twitter account, which were reported by the Anti-Cybercrime office. On 06 October 2016 she was released on bail and her case was adjourned. The matter was postponed on a number of occasions and the case against her remains on-going and she faces up to five years in jail.

Her case is another example of how the authorities use the Cyber Crimes Law to effectively target human rights defenders and the right to freedom of expression. A coalition of human rights organisation including GCHR, ANHRI, International Service for Human Rights (ISHR), and FIDH and the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT) within the framework of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, monitored the trial. The [trial observation report](#) noted violations of international law and breaches of the right to a fair trial. It stated that “Article 25 of the Penal Code already effectively places Kuwait's ruler beyond any public criticism. But the concurrent use of the new Cybercrimes law in this case constitutes a further erosion of the space for the free exchange of opinion and ideas”. The report also detailed wider legal issues facing journalists and human rights defenders in the country, which forms part of the wider context of ongoing prosecutions by the State in 2016.

OMAN

In 2016, Omani authorities, in particular the Internal Security Services (ISS), systematically targeted those exercising the right to freedom of opinion and expression. Media outlets were shut down, journalists subjected to judicial harassment, detention and on-going threats and online activists targeted for posts on social media. Detained journalists and human rights defenders faced torture and ill-treatment at the hands of the Special Division of the Omani Police, which represents the executive arm of the ISS. Oman continues to be one of the worst countries in the world for [freedom of press](#) and a dangerous place for human rights defenders.

In January 2016, the online magazine *Mowaten* (Citizen) was forced to stop publishing due to harassment of its staff by ISS. It is a local independent magazine, which focused on issues in Omani society and human rights issues and the protection of public freedoms in Oman. One of the editors **Basma Al-Badi**, was summoned by the ISS and interrogated for three days before being forced to sign a pledge to stop her work with the magazine. In 2015 another editor **Mohammed Al-Fazari** had a travel ban imposed against him and was placed under house arrest. He managed to flee the country and is now living in exile. His brother **Mahmoud Al-Fazari**, was detained and interrogated by authorities for two weeks in 2015.

On 31 January, GCHR issued an appeal on the case of blogger **Muawiya Al-Rawahi**, after his hearing was postponed by the Federal Supreme Court in the UAE. He had been stopped in February 2015 by UAE security intelligence at the border and was not allowed to return to Oman. During his detention he was denied medical treatment. The Federal Supreme Court finally acquitted him on 14 March 2016.

On 8 February 2016, online activist **Hassan Al-Basham** was sentenced to three years in prison as a result of online postings. He has written in defence of human rights activists and prisoners of conscience and also participates in humanitarian and social activities in Oman.

He has been subjected to torture in detention by the Special Division of the Omani Police in Sohar which represents the executive arm of the ISS. He was arrested on 3 May and his sentence was upheld by the Court of Appeal on 13 June 2016.

Later that month writer and online activist **Saed Al-Darodi** was sentenced to three months in prison *in absentia*, as a result of a post on *Facebook* in October 2014 where he stated "I'm not Omani...I'm Dhofari". Online activist **Hilal Al-Alawi** was summoned for interrogation by the Special Division in Sohar and held in incommunicado detention. He was released 10 days later. He is a prominent human rights activist and blogger who has been arrested and detained on several occasions in the past, including spending two years in prison before being released through an amnesty.

Prominent human rights defender Saed Jadad served the remainder of his one-year prison sentence in 2016 in Azrat central prison in Salalah. GCHR issued two appeals on his case, in April and May, regarding the deterioration of his health due to the conditions in prison and failure to provide necessary medical treatment. He was released on 26 August 2016. He had been arrested in November 2015 during a raid on his home following the ratification of a one-year prison sentence against him. He was convicted on charges of the alleged "use of an information network (Internet) in the dissemination of material that would prejudice public order."

On 15 April 2016, writer, cinema critic and online activist **Abdullah Habib** was summoned by the ISS to appear for investigation before the Special Division of the Omani Police General Command in Muscat. He was immediately detained and was denied access to his family or lawyer. His arrest was related to his writings on Facebook in which he defended human rights in Oman. He was released on 04 May 2016 only to be targeted again in November 2016 when he was sentenced to three years in prison and a fine of 2000 Omani Rials (US\$5200). Bail was set at 1000 Oman Rials (US\$2600) in order for him to appeal the verdict. He was charged with violating article 19 of the Information Technology Crimes Act for "using the Internet in what would prejudice the state public order."

On 18 April 2016, writer, broadcaster and online activist **Sulaiman Al-Moamari** was summoned by the ISS and then immediately arrested. He was detained in solitary confinement in Muscat without access to his family or lawyers. This happened shortly after he had expressed solidarity with Abdullah Habib following his arrest.

Writer and journalist **Almoatasem Al-Bahlani** was detained and interrogated for two days in July 2016 by the ISS as a result of online postings on social media as well as an article published in online magazine *Al-Falq* relating to Oman and the Panama Documents.

The second half of 2016 saw a campaign by the ISS targeting the newspaper *Azamn* and its staff. Prominent journalist and editor-in-chief of *Azamn*, **Ibrahim Al-Maamari**, was arrested on 28 July 2016 following the publication of an article entitled "Supreme bodies tie the hands of justice," which referred to the corruption of senior officials and their interference in judicial decisions. He was previously sentenced to five months in prison in September 2011 for allegedly insulting the Minister and Deputy Minister for Justice. On 03 August, the ISS summoned **Zaher Al-Abri**, a journalist with *Azamn* for interrogation and detained him upon his arrival.

The Vice-President of the Supreme Court, Ali bin Salem Al-Nomani, made a statement, welcomed by GCHR, in which he thanked the newspaper for disseminating facts and stated that Ibrahim Al-Maamari had spoken “honestly and sincerely.” Despite this, the campaign against *Azamn* continued to worsen when Deputy Editor **Yousef Al-Haj** was arrested and on 09 August the Omani government shut down the newspaper. On 15 August, the trial of Ibrahim Al-Maamari, Yousef Al-Haj and Zaher Al-Abri began at the Court of First Instance in Muscat. Charges brought against Al-Maamari included allegedly violating the press and publication law and the law of information technology crimes, undermining the prestige of the state, damaging public order and publishing documents regarding a case that is still being considered by the judiciary. The same charges were brought against Al-Haj in addition to others including violating an order of the Ministry of Information not to publish news or reports related to his two colleagues. Al-Abri faced the single charge related to his use of Twitter to describe the place of detention of his colleague Al-Maamari. At the hearing, the three journalists reported on the poor conditions of their detention including being placed in overcrowded cells and being denied basic requirements.

A day before the hearing writer **Hamood Al-Shukaily** was arrested in connection with posts on Facebook supporting the *Azamn* journalists and highlighting corruption in Oman. On 19 August, writer and poet **Mohammed Al-Harhi** was arrested by the ISS and interrogated without access to a lawyer. It is believed that his detention was due to postings in social media in which he expressed his solidarity with the *Azamn* journalists and Hamood Al-Shukaily.

On 22 August 2016, at the second hearing in the case of the three *Azamn* journalists, the judge decided to disallow the publication of the trial’s details in the media, citing Article 29 of the Press and Publications Law. He also decided to release Zaher Al-Abri on bail. The same day Yousef Al-Haj commenced a hunger strike in protest against the poor conditions in detention, which lasted three days. An update was issued by GCHR following the third hearing on 29 August 2016 which expressed further concern at the ill-treatment of the journalists at the hands of the Special Division in Muscat.

On 26 September, the Court of First Instance handed down prison sentences to the three journalists and ordered the permanent closure of the newspaper. Both Ibrahim Al-Maamari and Yousef Al-Haj were sentenced to three years’ imprisonment, in addition to a fine of 3000 RO (US \$7,800) and a ban on working as a journalist for a period of one year. Zaher Al-Abri, was sentenced to one year’s imprisonment and fined 1000RO (US \$2600).

GCHR issued appeals on the case of writer and storyteller Hamood Al-Shukaily. He was arrested by the ISS in August and charged under the Information Technology Crimes Act for alleged “incitement to protest” in relation to a poem he posted on *Facebook* and posts he made about the arrests of the *Azamn* journalists and corruption in Oman. One appeal was issued when he was charged in September and another following refusal to grant him bail. An update was issued on 20 October when he was sentenced to three years in prison. He was released on bail of 5000 RO (\$13,000) pending appeal.

On 08 October, GCHR issued an appeal on the case of online activist **Saqr Al-Balushi** following his arrest by the ISS. He was detained incommunicado and in solitary confinement in Muscat. He has expressed his views online showing his support for *Azamn* and promoted the defence of human rights. He was sentenced in 2014 to one year in prison on charges of gathering and disturbing public order.

October 2016 saw the first hearing of the Court of Appeal in the case against the *Azamn* journalists. At the beginning of the hearing the Court decided to ban the publication and circulation of the details of the hearing in all forms of media. The bail of Al-Maamari and Al-Haj was reduced and both men were released pending the outcome of the appeal.

In October, GCHR was one of ten signatories to a joint letter to the Sultan of Oman regarding the systematic targeting of journalists, human rights defenders and online activists by the ISS. It focused on the cases of the *Azamn* journalists and online activists including Saqr Al-Balushi, Hamood Al-Shukaily and Mohammed Al-Harhi.

The same month, online newspaper *Al-Balad* announced its closure after four years and five months in operation, because “current circumstances indicate that we must cease our work”. *Al-Balad* was an independent newspaper focused on Omani political, economic, social and cultural events, including the defense of prisoners of conscience, protection of public freedoms of citizens. *Al-Balad* showed its solidarity with its colleagues of the newspaper *Azamn*. The closure is further evidence of the systematic targeting of the ISS on freedom of expression and opinion in Oman.

In November 2016, a coalition of human rights groups, composed of GCHR, ANHRI, Front Line Defenders, RSF, FIDH and the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT), monitored the trial of the *Azamn* journalists and called for the sentences to be overturned. The coalition’s lawyer who monitored the hearing outlined procedural obstacles faced by the defence, breach of international standards of fair trial proceedings and concern over the placing of Al-Maamari and Al-Haj in solitary confinement. A Trial Observation Report was published by the coalition in late November which outlined how the case has been marked by procedural flaws, abuse of punitive press law and fell below international standards.

On 26 December the Court of Appeal announced its verdict in the case. It acquitted Zaher Al-Abri while Yousef Al-Haj and Ibrahim Al-Maamari were sentenced to one year and 6 months in prison, respectively, to include the time they have spent in detention to date. The court also revoked the decision to shut down *Azamn* newspaper, which was issued by the Ministry of Information. While GCHR welcomed the revocation of the decision it views the harassment and sentencing of the three journalists as clear evidence of the systematic and unjust targeting of journalists, the media and freedom of expression in Oman.

[QATAR](#)

Following a mission to Qatar in December 2015, GCHR published a report “Qatar, civil society and human rights: Lack of civil society space hinders work of human rights defenders”. It was launched on 09 March at a side event at the UNHRC. It discussed the human rights problems in Qatar and highlighted the need to expand civil society space. It identified migrant workers’ rights, women’s rights, freedom of expression and access to justice as human rights priorities. The report concludes by drawing on the main findings and providing a set of recommendations to the government of Qatar, including ratifying international legal instruments, amending the cybercrimes law and the related law to make it easier to form NGOs.

On 09 March, GCHR in co-operation with CIVICUS, Human Rights Watch and FIDH held a well-attended side event, entitled “**Civil Society Curtailed in Saudi Arabia & Qatar**”, during the 31st Session of the UNHRC. **James Mehigan**, a barrister from the United Kingdom who conducted a GCHR human rights mission to Qatar, spoke about the findings of the GCHR report and Maryam Al-Khawaja, former GCHR Co-Director, described the on-going legal targeting of human rights defenders, as detailed in the GCHR report “**Silenced Voices: The legal targeting of human rights defenders in Saudi Arabia**”.

On 17 March 2016, GCHR issued an appeal following the release of Qatari poet **Mohamed Rashid Al-Ajami** after five years in prison. He was arrested on 29 November 2011 and handed down a life sentence which was later reduced to 15 years for insulting the Emir of Qatar and allegedly “inciting to overthrow the ruling regime.” His arrest came after the publication of his “Jasmine poem,” which criticised governments across the Gulf region in the wake of the Arab Spring uprisings. He was released under an amnesty granted by the Prince of Qatar.

[SAUDI ARABIA](#)

The human rights situation did not improve in 2016 despite Saudi Arabia sitting on the UNHRC and a change in leadership the previous year. Women’s rights remain severely restricted and those who speak up in their defence are targeted. Human rights defenders are subjected to threats, arbitrary arrests and detention and freedom of association is severely limited. The crackdown on members of the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association (ACPRA) continued as members were handed down lengthy prison sentences and those in detention are subjected to poor conditions. Many websites, including the GCHR website, continued to be blocked in Saudi Arabia throughout 2016. GCHR issued two reports on human rights defenders, including one on the issues faced by human rights activists and the other on torture in the context of Saudi Arabia’s review before the UN Committee Against Torture (CAT).

On 12 January 2016, human rights defender **Samar Badawi** was arrested after she was summoned by the Criminal Investigation Authority in Jeddah for interrogation. She was transferred to Tahaban prison before being released the following day. She is a prominent human rights defender who has defended women’s rights including the right to drive and vote. It is thought that her arrest was related to postings made on the *Twitter* account of her former husband, detained human rights later **Waleed Abu Al-Khair**, which she is allegedly accused of running.

On 29 January 2016, GCHR published an update in relation to the members of ACPRA, who have been systematically targeted by authorities in an attempt to dismantle the organisation. ACPRA was established in 2009 to promote civil and political rights and to respond to increased arrests following the second Gulf war. Their activities range from open letters and petitions, community outreach events, participating in international human rights activities and direct communications with the relevant authorities in Saudi Arabia. The group aimed to document human rights violations, use the international mechanisms including the UN system to protect people’s rights and increase awareness of civil and political rights.

A couple of years after its foundation, ACPRA members were targeted by the authorities on charges of inciting public dissent and the information technology crimes law (paragraph one of article 6) has been used to justify charges against ACPRA members. In addition, “ta'azir”, or deciding a penalty by the religious judge as he deems appropriate, has been applied to justify the lengthy imprisonment, lashing, and travel bans applied in sentencing ACPRA members for their peaceful and legitimate human rights activities. Most trials of the members took place at the Specialised Criminal Court (SCC) assigned to cases of allegedly terror-related crimes.

In April 2016, GCHR published a briefing paper “ [Silenced Voices: Judicial targeting of human rights defenders in Saudi Arabia](#)”, as Saudi Arabia underwent its mid-term reporting at the UN, between its Universal Periodic Review and the UN CAT in April. It outlined how authorities use legislation, in particular, the Anti-Terror Law and the Anti-Cybercrimes Law to systematically target human rights defenders. Methods used to persecute activists include travel bans, arbitrary detention, defamation and judicial measures including death penalty sentences, lengthy sentences, fines and flogging, an illegal practice under international law. At a joint side event of the 31st session of the UNHRC in March Maryam Al-Khawaja, GCHR Co-Director, had described the ongoing legal targeting of human rights defenders, as detailed in the GCHR report.

GCHR also published a “[Report on Torture in Saudi Arabia](#)” submitted as an alternative report to the 57th session of the CAT, in which it outlined the issues facing human rights defenders in violation of the UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. While Saudi Arabia has modified its legislation since its initial review in 2002, it still falls short of its international obligations and torture continues to take place with impunity.

In April, human rights defender **Issa Al-Hamid** was sentenced to nine years in prison following a hearing before the SCC in Riyadh. He is a founding member and former President of ACPRA. His two brothers, Dr. **Abdullah Al-Hamid** and Dr. **Abdulrahman Al-Hamid** are also in prison due to their human rights activities.

In May the targeting of ACPRA members continued. On 29 May, principal member of ACPRA, **Abdulaziz Al-Shubaili**, was sentenced to eight years in prison followed by an eight-year travel ban, by the SCC. Charges related to allegedly publishing a statement calling for demonstrations; accusing judges of dishonesty and human rights violations; participating in an unauthorised association, ACPRA, and failing to comply with the judicial decision to dissolve ACPRA.

In June, GCHR issued two appeals on the case of prominent human rights defender and lawyer, Waleed Abu Al-Khair. He commenced a hunger strike, which lasted five days, to protest against prison conditions and ill-treatment in Thahban Reformatory Prison, including a lack of adequate medical attention. GCHR condemned the targeting of Waleed Abu Al-Khair and called on the authorities to uphold its obligations stipulated by the UN Standard Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners of 1955. He is currently serving a 15-year sentence handed down as a result of his peaceful human rights work. He is the founder and Director of the independent non-profit civil rights organisation Monitor of Human Rights in Saudi Arabia (MHRSA).

Multiple trumped-up charges were brought against him including “antagonising international organisations against the kingdom,” relating to his engagement with international human rights mechanisms including the UN system and ‘setting up and supervising an unlicensed association’ referring to MHRSA.

Following a rapid appeal by GCHR about Abu Al-Khair’s [hunger strike](#), we got a letter from his sister, saying:

“On Sunday 11/june, my brother called me.., informing us that he has stopped his hunger strike, as the prison administrators responded by meeting with him and allowing him to receive his books, while allowing a daily visit to the prison library, they allowed his medical checks to be performed. Waleed asked me to thank all of you for your immediate response and support, which enforced the prison to take action fast. Waleed would like to thank in particular, Amnesty International, PEN International, the Gulf Center for Human Rights... and anyone who stood for him.”

In July, GCHR and ANHRI called on the UN General Assembly to suspend the membership of Saudi Arabia in the UNHRC and to ensure that it is not elected to another term based on its poor human rights record. It reminded the General Assembly of Saudi Arabia’s dire human rights record and the on-going human rights violations that take place on a daily basis with impunity. It highlighted the issues faced by human rights defenders including reprisals for cooperating with UN mechanisms. Since its election to the HRC in 2013, it has continued to commit systematic human rights violations, including carrying out over 350 executions.

Saudi Arabia leads the military coalition fighting in Yemen, which has perpetrated numerous attacks in violation of international humanitarian law, including airstrikes, which have reportedly killed and wounded thousands of civilians. Furthermore it has used its position on the HRC to block the establishment of an independent investigation into the atrocities in Yemen.

In November, GCHR issued an appeal, following the first hearing by the SCC of human rights defenders, **Mohammed Abdullah Al-Otaibi** and **Abdullah Al-Attawi**. Charges against them include, establishing an association and announcing it before obtaining official authorisation and preparing and signing petitions and publishing them on the Internet. In March 2014, the Bureau of Investigation and Prosecution (BIP) began investigating them, after they announced the establishment of the El-Etihad Association for Human Rights, together with **Mohammed Ayeth Al-Otaibi** and **Abdullah Faisal Badrani**.

In another case, on 03 November 2016, human rights defender **Khaled Al-Omair** was transferred from Al-Ha’ir prison in Riyadh to Mohammed bin Nayef Counseling and Care Centre in preparation for his release. On 6 October 2016, Al-Omair started a hunger strike which lasted 29 days in protest against the failure to release him after his eight-year prison sentence had expired.

In December a further appeal was issued on the case of Issa Al-Hamid when he was sentenced to two additional years in prison and a fine of 100,000 Saudi Riyals (USD\$26,605). On 18 December 2016, security forces in Jizan arrested community activist **Issa Al-Nukhaifi**. It is believed that his arrest is related to his efforts to combat corruption in the Jizan region and his recent online activities. He has campaigned against the government's policy of displacing families from the Saudi-Yemeni borders for security measures without offering adequate compensation. He previously spent three years and eight months in prison and was released in April 2016. While in detention he was reportedly tortured and placed in solitary confinement.

SYRIA

The human rights situation in Syria continues to deteriorate as the conflict continues. Human rights defenders face targeting from all sides of the conflict. Prominent human rights defenders who were enforceably disappeared remain unaccounted for despite international calls for their release. Freedom of expression is seriously restricted and journalists and online activists are targeted as a result of their work.

The whereabouts of human rights defender and lawyer **Razan Zaitouneh** and other members of the Violations Documentation Centre (VDC), **Samira Al-Khalil**, **Wa'el Hamada** and **Nazim Hammadi** - collectively known as the "Douma Four", remain unknown. VDC is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation that has been monitoring and documenting the violations of human rights in Syria since April 2011.

In February 2016, Razan Zaitouneh was nominated as prisoner of the month of "Their freedom is their right" campaign, which defends the rights of prisoners of conscience. The campaign was launched by the Maharat Foundation and ANHRI and has ten other members including GCHR. On 9 December 2013, a group of armed men broke into the VDC offices in Douma City and kidnapped Razan Zaitouneh together with her husband Wa'el Hamada and colleagues Samira Khalil and Nazem Hamadi.

On 29 April, the birthday of Razan Zaitouneh, a further appeal was issued calling for the immediate release of the Douma Four and concern was expressed for their health and well-being.

On 09 December 2016, the three-year anniversary of the kidnapping of the "Douma Four", GCHR was one of 56 human rights organisations who signed an appeal calling for their immediate release. Despite such international pressure, their whereabouts and details of their health and safety remain unknown at the end of 2016 and GCHR expresses serious concern for their well-being.

Prior to her abduction, Zaitouneh had continuously reported on human rights violations in Syria. She had published dozens of articles and reports in various websites and newspapers about the rights and freedom of opinion and expression in Syria since 2004. She won the Anna Politkovskaya Award for human rights defenders, and also received the Sakharov Prize awarded by the European Parliament, together with the prominent Syrian cartoonist Ali Farzat. She had received threats from local armed groups in Douma prior to her disappearance.

In March 2016, GCHR published a report entitled “Syrian Human Rights Defenders Losing Hope with International Community as Human Rights Violations Continue Unabated”. The report was based on a mission to the border of Syria in 2015 during which dozens of human rights defenders were interviewed, and follow-up research including personal testimonies. The report highlighted the lack of response to promote and protect human rights defenders working in life-threatening situations. It focused on three groups of human rights defenders: journalists, lawyers and humanitarian workers and was launched at a side event of the UNHRC on 16 March 2016.

In March 2016, a joint appeal was issued on the case of **Bassel Khartabil** on the fourth anniversary of his arrest. Bassel Khartabil is a software developer and free speech activist who was arrested on 15 March 2012 by Military Intelligence. He was held for eight months in incommunicado detention before being moved to Adra prison in Damascus. He was later transferred to an undisclosed location and reports received suggest he has been sentenced to death by a Military Field Court. His current situation remains unknown despite repeated international calls and campaigns for his release. He has won many awards, including the 2013 Index on Censorship Digital Freedom Award for using technology to promote an open and free internet, and was named one of *Foreign Policy* magazine’s Top 100 Global Thinkers of 2012 “for insisting, against all odds, on a peaceful Syrian revolution”. Bassel Khartabil was named “Their freedom is their right” campaign, prisoner of the month in August 2016.

On 1 April 2016, human rights defender and executive director of the Syrian Centre for Democracy and Civil Rights, **Jdeh Abdullah Nawfal**, was arrested at the immigration office close to the Syrian-Lebanese border as he was on his way to attend a human rights workshop in Beirut. He was released on 23 April. He has been arrested and detained on several occasions for his human rights activism. He served a five-year prison sentence from 1992 to 1997.

On 12 June 2016, an assassination attempt took place on the life of Syrian human rights defender and journalist **Ahmed Abdel-Qader** by the terrorist group Daesh in Turkey. Two armed men on a motorbike shot at the journalist three times. This was the second attempt on his life due to his journalism and activism. He founded the news outlet “Eye on the homeland” and co-founded the award-winning activist group Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently (RBSS), which has documented human rights violations, particularly by Daesh. The terrorist group has claimed responsibility for the murder of several journalists including Ahmed Abdel-Qader’s brother Ibrahim in October 2015.

On 25 July 2016, an appeal was issued following the air attack on the offices of VDC in Douma. A jet fighter launched two missiles destroying the offices although fortunately there were no casualties. GCHR believes that this attack is part of the continued targeting of civil society organisations by the Syrian government through its security services.

On 4 October 2016, a joint appeal was issued by 31 human rights organisations including GCHR on the fourth anniversary of the enforced disappearance of human rights lawyer Khalil Ma'touq and his assistant **Mohamed Thatha**. On October 02 2012, the two men were reportedly arrested at a government-operated checkpoint on their way from Ma'touq's home in the Damascus suburb of Sahnaya to his office in Damascus. Despite repeated requests for information to the public prosecutor's office in Damascus in 2012 and 2013 by family and colleagues, Syrian authorities have denied that they arrested the men. However, individuals released from detention facilities have reported seeing the men including in Branch 235, notorious for its poor conditions, over-crowding and lack of access to food, water and hygiene facilities. Ma'touq and Thatha have not been released despite calls by human rights activists and organisations to end the practices of enforced disappearances and torture and other ill-treatment in detention facilities in Syria. UN Security Council Resolution 2139 of February 2014 demanded the release of all those arbitrarily detained, a call reiterated by a UN Security Council Presidential Statement on August 17, 2015.

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

Human rights defenders belonging to the group of activists known collectively as the UAE94 continued to suffer in 2016. Many remain in detention serving lengthy sentences and authorities have targeted their families as a means of further targeting the human rights defenders. Dr. **Nasser Bin Ghaith** spent the first four months of the year in incommunicado detention followed by an on-going trial which fell grossly short of international fair trial procedure.

On 04 March 2016, GCHR was one of ten human rights organisations that issued a joint appeal on the third anniversary of the mass trial of the UAE94 calling for the release of those imprisoned. The UAE94 include government critics and reform activists, including prominent human rights defenders, lawyers, judges, academics, and student leaders. Among the group are prominent human rights lawyers Dr. **Mohammed Al-Roken** and Dr. **Mohammed Al-Mansoori**, tried as a result of their peaceful human rights activities. The notorious trial, which began in 2013, failed to meet minimum international fair trial standards and has been widely condemned by human rights organisations and international, including UN, human rights bodies.

Later that month another appeal was issued when the authorities revoked the citizenship of the children of one of the UAE94, **Mohammed Abdul Razzaq Al-Siddiq**, leaving them stateless and without proof of identity. He is currently serving a ten-year sentence. GCHR condemned the targeting of his family and expressed serious concern at this tactic used as a means of discrediting the work of human rights defenders.

On 4 April 2016, eight months after he was forcibly disappeared, Dr. **Nasser Bin Ghaith**, was brought before the Federal Supreme Court in Abu Dhabi on trumped up charges. He is a respected economist and academic who was arrested in August 2015 during a raid on his home and held in an undisclosed location until the hearing. He had been previously arrested in April 2011 with four other human rights defenders in a case known as the UAE5. They were charged with "publicly insulting" the UAE's rulers and using a banned online political forum.

Dr. Bin Ghaith was charged with allegedly “committing a hostile act against a foreign state,” “posting false information in order to harm the reputation and stature of the state and one of its institutions” and “posting false information about UAE leaders and their policies, offensively criticising the construction of a Hindu temple in Abu Dhabi, and instigating the people of the UAE against their leaders and government.” The charges against him were based on comments he made on Twitter about the Egyptian government and meetings with peaceful political activists, as well as anti-terrorism charges pertaining to meetings he had with UAE exiles in Turkey in violation of his right to freedom of expression.

Hearings in Dr. Bin Ghaith’s trial have been held behind closed doors in clear breach of international legal standards. In April, he informed the Court of how he had been subjected to torture and ill-treatment while being held at the undisclosed location. A second hearing took place in May despite the fact that he was denied access to his lawyer or family. A third hearing took place in June, after it had been postponed on a previous occasion. Further hearings took place in September, October and November.

GCHR led a coalition of groups to submit an appeal to the UN and monitor the trial of academic [Dr. Nasser Bin Ghaith](#), on trial for critical tweets, in the United Arab Emirates. The coalition supporting Dr. Bin Ghaith consists of GCHR, ANHRI; the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS); FIDH and OMCT, within the framework of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders; Front Line Defenders; Human Rights Watch; International Service for Human Rights (ISHR); and Scholars at Risk. Security officers in civilian clothes arrested Dr. Bin Ghaith in Abu Dhabi on 18 August 2015. At Dr. Bin Ghaith’s trial on 27 September 2016, court officials prevented a United Kingdom-based lawyer from entering the court to observe the trial on behalf of the coalition. He remains in prison to this date, despite his case being transferred to a Federal Appeal Court.

GCHR issued six appeals, updates and news pieces, including two joint appeals, on Dr. Bin Ghaith’s case over the course of the year. One appeal was directed at the Special Procedures Branch of the OHCHR in Geneva seeking urgent help to secure his release. On 05 December 2016, GCHR welcomed the news that the case was to be transferred to the Federal Appeal Court, which allows Dr. Bin Ghaith the right to appeal his case under a new law. Despite continued calls for him to be freed by the international human rights community he remained in detention at the close of 2016.

On 8 August 2016, GCHR issued an appeal on the case of human rights defender **Osama Al-Najjar**, following an arbitrary decision by the State Security Apparatus (SSA) not to release him. Under the UAE Punitive Installations Law he is entitled to be released after serving three quarters of his three-year sentence. He is the son of UAE94 activist **Hossain Al-Najjar** and he was arrested in March 2014. Charges against him include allegedly “committing a hostile act against a foreign state,” and “posting false information in order to harm the reputation and stature of the state and one of its institutions”.

On 10 and 11 August 2016, human rights defender and blogger **Ahmed Mansoor**, a member of GCHR's Advisory Board, received text messages with a link that [Citizen Lab](#) recognised as Pegasus spyware. If clicked, it would have potentially allowed the Emirati government to activate the phone's microphone and camera at any time, record calls and messages from any applications, and track Mansoor's location. Since his release from prison in 2011, he has not remained silent about human rights, despite the huge price he has had to pay - no passport, no freedom of movement, no job, and constant fear of re-arrest.

YEMEN

Human rights defenders in war-torn Yemen undertake their work in a dangerous and hostile environment as they face human rights violations at the hands of all parties to the conflict. Journalists and online activists undertake their work under threat to their safety as freedom of expression remains severely restricted.

On 16 June 2016, a side event on the human rights and humanitarian situation in Yemen was held during the 32nd session of the UNHRC in Geneva. Participants at the panel, entitled "Under Fire: human rights defenders, journalists, and civilian casualties", called for greater protection for those on the ground in Yemen. The panel was organised by GCHR, Mwatana organisation for Human Rights, the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS), Human Rights Watch, the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, the World organisation Against Torture (OMCT), the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), CIVICUS, and the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ). Co-Director of GCHR, **Khalid Ibrahim** called on "on all those who are party to the conflict in Yemen to protect civilians and continue negotiations; and respect and protect freedom of expression from all sides of the conflict." He also demanded the release of detained human rights defenders and for those responsible to guarantee the safety of journalists and for an investigation to be established into the murder of journalist and activist **Abdulkarim Al-Khaiwani** in March 2015.

In September 2016, GCHR was one of 11 human rights organisations that issued a joint letter to permanent Member and Observer States of the UN. The letter outlined the human rights violations committed by both the Saudi-led coalition and the Houthi armed group and forces allied to it. It highlighted how serious violations and abuses of international law have continued throughout the fighting and urged support for the UN High Commissioner's call for an international, independent investigation into civilian deaths and injuries in Yemen, a call [repeatedly](#) made by national, regional and international [civil society organisations](#).

On 02 October 2015, the council adopted [HRC resolution 30/18](#), a deeply flawed resolution, drafted by Saudi Arabia, a party to the conflict that ignored earlier calls for an international inquiry and instead endorsed a Yemeni national commission. In August 2016, the High Commissioner for Human Rights, in concluding that the Yemeni commission was not acting in accordance with international standards, said the "commission did not enjoy the cooperation of all concerned parties and could not operate in all parts of Yemen," and "has not been able to provide the impartial and wide-ranging inquiry that is required by serious allegations of violations and abuse." At the close of 2016, an adequate independent investigation had yet to be established.

On 27 October 2016, GCHR launched a report on Yemen [“Let Them Speak: Media and Freedom of Expression targeted in Yemen”](#), at a NGO roundtable discussion in New York. The report aimed to document and highlight cases of journalists and media professionals as well as social media activists and reporters who have been subjected to human rights violations as they bravely report on and attempt to bring attention to the situation in Yemen. Among the report’s recommendations, was a call for the UN and Yemeni authorities to enhance protection for the media and human rights defenders, including by promoting a cease-fire, while recognising the importance of the role of youth, women and civil society in the peace building processes.

In December 2016, GCHR issued a statement of sympathy following the death of prominent independent journalist and human rights defender **Mohammed Al-Abbsi**. He had published numerous news stories and articles about corruption in Yemen, for which he was constantly targeted. In February 2017, GCHR called for an independent, impartial and thorough investigation into the death of Al-Abbsi after results of an autopsy suggested he was poisoned by exposure to toxic gas.

IV. CONCLUSION

Countries in the Gulf region continued to face serious challenges in 2016 including political instability, conflict, and human rights violations. The countries in which GCHR works continue to suffer some of the worst humanitarian and human rights crises since World War II. The events of the popular movements this decade which were part of the Arab Spring opened a window of hope for the human rights activists, groups, and organisations for an opportunity to enact widespread systemic change. However, current geopolitical wars, policies and violent government regimes have increased the volatility of the region and human rights defenders carry out their work in an increasingly dangerous environment.

Journalists and media workers are subjected to threats, harassment, arrest and detention and even attempted assassinations due to their important work especially in war-torn Iraq, Syria and Yemen. Media outlets and newspapers were shut down and websites blocked in Oman and Saudi Arabia. Bloggers and online activists are targeted for simply expressing their opinions and beliefs as restrictions on freedom of expression remained a critical issue in the Gulf region and neighbouring countries in 2016. Legislation, including anti-cybercrime laws are increasingly used to restrict this most fundamental human right, and those who appear before court are not afforded trials that respect international standards of law.

Women human rights defenders face the additional burden of gender-specific threats and violence. GCHR reports on the Kurdistan region in Iraq and the Middle East and North Africa region more generally demonstrated the challenges that these brave women confront including arrest, detention, violence and judicial harassment. In a statement to mark International Women Human Rights Defenders day, on 29 November 2016, UN experts stated: “Women human rights defenders face unique challenges, driven by deep-rooted discrimination against women and stereotypes about their appropriate role” and outlined how women were being killed for their courageous stand; while others faced violence, harassment, social stigma and sometimes imprisonment.

Human rights defenders were subjected to ill-treatment and torture at the hands of authorities throughout 2016. In 2016, both Kuwait and Saudi Arabia were reviewed by UN CAT. Detained members of the UAE94 and the ACPRA in Saudi Arabia as well as human rights defenders in Bahrain and throughout the Gulf region and neighbouring countries are kept in appalling conditions often without access to basic hygiene facilities or necessary medical treatment.

The space for civil society in the Gulf region is lacking. Human rights organisations are often not granted a license or are actively shut down by authorities. In some countries, such as Qatar, there is a dearth of human rights organisations due to the hostile environment towards them which prevails. Human rights defenders who engage with international mechanisms often face reprisals as a result including arrest, detention and travel bans. In Bahrain human rights defenders were prevented from travelling to the UNHRC in Geneva in June and September 2016 by the imposition of travel bans against them just before they were due to depart.

On the eve of world Human Rights Day, 10 December 2016, UN experts, stated: “Today, a chill wind is blowing through much of the world and the very notion of human rights is under increasing attack. So-called populist movements are invoking nationalism and traditionalism to justify racist, xenophobic, sexist, and other forms of blatant discrimination, taking advantage also of the difficulties of the current economic climate.... In many parts of the world these assaults on human rights are being reinforced by attacks on the human rights movement.”

It is these attacks which human rights defenders in the Gulf region and neighbouring countries face on a daily basis as they bravely and peacefully strive to promote and protect human rights. Through its work, GCHR aims to support and protect these human rights defenders and to ensure their safety as they carry out their peaceful and legitimate human rights work in the face of adversity. Thank you to all the supporters worldwide who offer solace and assistance to human rights defenders in need.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

GCHR recommends that all governments and state authorities in the Gulf Region and neighbouring countries:

- Guarantee the right to freedom of expression and freedom of opinion, through all possible measures including protecting journalists, media workers and on-line activists from any reprisals or judicial harassment;
- Ensure that legislation, including cyber-crime legislation and anti-terrorism legislation, is not used as a tool for targeting human rights defenders for their peaceful human rights work, including by the amendment of such legislation where necessary;
- Ensure that the right to peaceful freedom of assembly is respected and protected so that people are allowed to protest peacefully without fear of physical violence, intimidation or any form of reprisals;
- Ensure that the right to peaceful freedom of association is respected and protected so that independent human rights NGOs may operate safely and free from judicial harassment, arrest and abuse;

- Guarantee the promotion and protection of civil society and cherish its role in society as a means of fostering human rights;
- Amend any national laws to ensure security of residence status for all residents and prevent the use, or threat of use, of nationality laws as a means of stifling civil society;
- Ensure that all those detained are treated with dignity, their physical and psychological integrity is protected and that conditions in all detention facilities are in line with international standards;
- Ensure that all those detained are protected from any form of ill-treatment and torture as set out in international law;
- Guarantee that where there is evidence of torture or ill-treatment by state authorities, that a prompt and independent investigation is established with a view to bringing those responsible to justice in line with international standards;
- Ensure that access to justice is guaranteed to all and that any legal proceedings taken adhere to the right to a fair trial and international fair legal procedures standards;
- Provide adequate channels and mechanisms for reporting and investigating any form of harassment, intimidation or targeting of human rights defenders, by state authorities and other parties, as a result of their peaceful and legitimate human rights work;
- Ensure that all human rights defenders, and all citizens, are free to avail of and engage with the UN human rights mechanisms and the international human rights community;
- Engage with UN human rights mechanisms where to do so would benefit the promotion and protection of human rights; and
- Ensure that human rights defenders are able to carry out their legitimate and peaceful human rights work without fear of reprisals and free from all restrictions.