

The GCHR 2013 Annual Report

Attacks on Human Rights Defenders Continue



(Imprisoned Founder Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja and Secretary General Nabeel Rajab)

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Introduction

This is the first annual report published by the Gulf Centre for Human Rights (**GCHR**). The report documents aspects of human rights developments in the Gulf region with a particular focus on issues related to freedom of association and expression. The report attempts to give an overview of issues related to the work of human rights defenders in the region during 2012. It examines the dangers they face and the attempts made to hinder their important human rights work including by the enforcement of legal and policy restrictions by state actors. The report covers 10 countries: the six Gulf Cooperation Council (**GCC**) member states (**Oman, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, UAE and Saudi Arabia**), **Iraq, Iran, Yemen, and Syria**.

The inclusion of **Syria**, which is not part of the Gulf region, in the report is necessitated by the extraordinary events and the massive human rights abuses taking place in the country at present which have implications for the whole region.

The report reveals a substantial increase in the violation of the right to freedom of association and expression and the targeting, in particular, of human rights defenders. Many human rights defenders featured in the report, were the subject of a myriad of abuses, varying from country to country, which included among others: arbitrary arrest and detention; harassment; intimidation; malicious prosecution; unfair trial; physical and electronic surveillance; restriction of movement and the imposition of travel bans; hijacking and blocking of Internet sites, personal blog spots, and social media accounts; physical assaults and verbal abuse; cyber and media smear campaigns; defamation; denial of access to the media; restriction on access to employment and means of livelihood.

2012 witnessed the introduction of collective measures by the **GCC** members which violate human rights in general and the right to freedom of association and expression in particular. Two worrying developments in this regard included the adoption by the **GCC** of a joint security agreement and the move to adopt a joint information technology crimes law. These developments are apparently part of an overall **GCC** strategy led by **Saudi Arabia** to harmonize the legal systems of the **GCC** states, to the detriment of the right to freedom of expression and association. **Kuwait**, which had refused in the past to adopt the joint security agreement, has now towed the line, triggering criticism within the country of this move, which human rights defenders regard as a serious setback to civil and other liberties in the country and the region.



Relations between **Iran** and the **GCC** states deteriorated during the year, which in turn saw an increase in the persecution of human rights defenders who were often accused in the region of being agents of **Iran**. In its summit held in Manama in December 2012, **Bahrain**, the **GCC** heads of state adopted a resolution condemning **Iran** and accusing it of undermining the security of the **GCC** states.

The year witnessed the introduction of economic and other sanctions on **Iran** by the **US** and the **EU** states in relation to its nuclear policy which led to an increase in the persecution of human rights defenders in the country and to **Iran** flexing its military muscle heightening an already tense situation in the Gulf region. Furthermore, in 2012, the human rights record of **Iran** was criticised by the **UN** at the **UN** General Assembly and through the work of the Special Rapporteur on **Iran**. **Iran** has so far refused, despite repeated calls, to allow the Special Rapporteur Mr. **Ahmad Shahid** to visit the country.

Positive developments in the field of human rights in the region during the year included the accession of the **UAE** in July to the **UN** Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment.

In 2012 **Bahrain** was scrutinised by the **UN** Human Rights Council on its human rights record. In May the Universal Periodic Review mechanism came up with numerous recommendations on aspects of human rights in the country including abuses committed against human rights defenders. The government of **Bahrain**'s undertaking to implement most of the 176 recommendations made by **UN** member states was welcomed by the international human rights community. There were, however, concerns that these pledges may not be fulfilled given the country's failure to implement crucial parts of recommendations made by the **Bahrain** Independent Commission of Inquiry (**BICI**) which concluded its work of looking into the incidents that occurred during [the period of unrest in Bahrain](#) in February and March 2011, in November of that year.

In **Kuwait** democracy suffered a setback as a result of amendments introduced to the electoral law and the boycotting of the opposition of voting in the parliamentary elections in October.

The Gulf Centre for Human Rights reveals in its first annual report a deteriorating status of human rights in the region during 2012. Throughout the year the Gulf Centre for Human Rights documented numerous cases of abuses and sent missions to a number of countries in the region. During its first year the Gulf Centre for Human Rights trained about 120 human rights defenders on topics which included Digital security; the use of **UN** mechanisms; the use of Social Media networks to promote human rights; Security and protection; Transitional justice; and Documentation of human rights violations. In addition it sent two human rights missions to **UAE**, two to **Bahrain**, and one to **Iraq**.



BAHRAIN

Relentless persecution of human rights defenders remained a prominent feature of repression in **Bahrain** during a year which witnessed a continuation of peaceful protests calling for democratic reform and political participation. The policy of marginalization of the majority population of the country by the ruling monarchy remained unchanged.

There were numerous reports of use of excessive force by police in the face of increased protests against the government across the country. Police often resorted to the use of tear gas and pellets leading to killings and injuries among mostly peaceful demonstrators. There were also reports of severe beatings, sexual harassment, deprivation of food and water, and denial of access to medication and medical care, of human rights defenders and advocates of political reform held in the custody of the Bahraini authorities. The year saw extreme repressive measures imposed against political opponents by the stripping of more than thirty of them of their **Bahrain** nationality on accusations of undermining state security.

Arbitrary arrest and detention, physical and psychological torture, judicial harassment and unfair trials were used by the authorities against human rights defenders to deter them from their peaceful and legitimate human rights work. These repressive measures were allegedly used as a form of punishment and to deter activists from following the lead of jailed internationally renowned human rights defenders Mr. **Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja** and Mr. **Nabeel Rajab**, in calling for human rights and an end to violations in the country.

Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja continues to serve a life sentence imposed following a grossly unfair trial by a military court on charges relating to his peaceful human rights work. He suffers from a chronic pain in his jaw as a result of injuries caused by torture to which he was subjected while he was held in incommunicado detention. **Nabeel Rajab** is serving a two-year prison term handed down following an unfair trial on charges relating to his peaceful human rights work in the country. He has been ill-treated in prison and is often denied access to medication he needs to take regularly for a kidney condition. It is also reported that his access to water and other liquids were also restricted on occasion.

At the end of the year the Bahraini authorities continued to drag their feet on the implementation of the recommendations of the **BICI** more than a year after the conclusion of its work in November 2011. Despite taking part of the recommendations which were made at **Bahrain's UPR** on board and implementing some of them, major policy and legal constraints that severely restrict the right to freedom of expression and association in the country remain in place. Examples of these restrictions included various provisions in the penal code which curtail freedom of association, criminalize "illegal" criticism of government policies, and restrict peaceful assembly in public places. During the year the government introduced new legal restrictions on freedom of assembly.



In addition to these restrictions, law enforcement agencies used excessive force against human rights defenders and peaceful pro-democracy protesters. Among those targeted were prominent human rights defenders **Zainab Al-Khawaja** and **Sayed Yousif Al-Muhafadha**, both of whom were in jail at the end of the year. **Zainab Al-Khawaja** was arrested in December for staging a one-woman protest outside the Salmaniya Hospital. One new charge of incitement to overthrow the government was added to a list of more than ten charges brought against her during the year. She has been in and out of arbitrary detention since 2011 for the sole reason of exercising her right to freedom of expression and association and campaigning for the release of human rights defenders and peaceful protesters including her father **Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja**.

Mr. **Sayed Yousif Al-Muhafadha**, Vice President of the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights, was arrested in November while monitoring anti-government protests. He is renowned for his robust monitoring and documentation of human violations including through his blogs. Another victim of reprisal was the President of the Bahrain Society for Human Rights Society, Mr. **Mohammad Al-Maskati**, renowned for his lead in monitoring and documenting abuses and communicating information to the outside world. He was detained and questioned in October solely for working with the UN human rights mechanisms particularly during the Universal Periodic Review of **Bahrain's** record of human rights.

IRAN

2012 saw a continuation of violations of the right to freedom of association and expression in **Iran**. The work of independent human rights NGOs remained severely restricted and independent human rights defenders, trade unionists and journalists were persecuted and often accused of spreading anti-government propaganda. Minorities in **Iran** continued to face discrimination and persecution.

Imprisoned prominent Iranian trade unionist and member of the Board of Directors of Tehran and its Suburbs Bus Workers Union **Reza Shahabi** started a hunger strike in December in protest against his continued ill-treatment in prison. He was reported to have been physically and verbally abused by a prison guard who brought him back from hospital, where he had been transferred for medical treatment. He was arrested in June 2010 and was reported to have been tortured during his interrogation. As a result he suffered a spinal injury for which he underwent an operation. He has recently complained of neck and back injuries and a loss of sensation in his feet and fingers.



In September 2012, the Be Voice of Iranian Teachers campaign group issued an initial list of 40 Iranian teachers who remained in detention in 2012, having been arrested in 2009. Three of the teacher trade unionists had been sentenced to death and 15 others were handed down prison terms on charges relating to their trade union work and taking part in demonstrations demanding improvement of teachers' working conditions.

Hundreds of teachers were dismissed from their jobs by the Disciplinary Violations Board of the Ministry of Education for taking part in the demonstrations and calling for a guarantee of the rights enshrined in articles 26 and 27 of the Iranian Constitution, which relate to freedom of assembly and association, and international standards to which **Iran** is a state party.

Further restrictive measures were taken against Iranian lawyers in what was seen as additional punitive measures to deter them from providing legal assistance to victims of human rights violations in the country. One of these attacks was the threat in November 2012 to close down the Union of the Bar Associations. The threatened closure of the body came on the eve of the Bar entrance exam for new lawyers. The judicial order threatening the closure of the union was apparently politically motivated and had been influenced by the claim by the Ministry of Interior that the body was operating without a license. Last minute negotiations between the directors of the bar and senior judicial authorities led to the suspension of the order. Furthermore, the move by the Iranian authorities to bring further restrictions on the work of the Iranian Bar Association was criticized by the International Bar Association's Human Rights Institute (**IBAHRI**). It is feared that the proposed amendments would jeopardize the independence of the Bar Association, hamper the work of lawyers and allow for governmental control over the body.

The Iranian human rights community continued to suffer relentless repression and prominent human rights defenders and lawyers were sentenced during the year to long terms of imprisonment following unfair trials. In September, apparently the last remaining member of the Centre for Human Rights Defenders **CHRD**, human rights lawyer Mr. **Mohamed Ali Dadkhah**, was detained and ordered to serve nine years in prison in relation to his peaceful and legitimate human rights work. He joined in Evin Prison his fellow **CHRD** members, Ms. **Nasrin Soutodeh**, arrested in September 2010 and sentenced to six years in prison; Mr. **Mohammad Seifzadeh**, arrested in April 2011 and subsequently sentenced to nine years in prison; Mr. **Abdolfattah Soltani**, arrested in September 2011 and sentenced in 2012 to 13 years in prison and barred from practicing law for 20 years.



On 4 December, **Nasrin Soutodeh** ended a 49 day hunger strike which she had waged in protest against the banning by the Iranian authorities of her 13 year old daughter **Mehraveh** from travelling. Following her strike she was moved to solitary confinement and held for three weeks. **Nasrin Soutodeh** ended her strike when the authorities lifted the judicial restrictions imposed on her daughter. **Nasrin Soutodeh** won the 2012 **Sakharov Prize** for freedom of thought, awarded by the European Parliament. **CHRD** which provides legal assistance to human rights defenders, journalists and political prisoners was declared unlawful by the Iranian authorities in 2006. **CHRD** was cofounded by Nobel laureate **Shirin Ebadi** and the above mentioned human rights defenders.

On 6 November, the Iranian authorities told the family of human rights blogger **Sattar Beheshti** of his death in custody without giving further explanation. But according to *Kaleme.com* he was tortured and beaten by his interrogators following his arrest at his family home. According to accounts made by his sister the 35 year old blogger was arrested on 30 October when plain clothes Iranian security agents raided the family home without producing any warrant and took him away at gun point without explanation. Before his death the blogger was held at the notorious Ward 350 at Evin Prison. According to Persian language media reports, his last blogs before his detention focused on **Iran's** foreign policy and the hunger strike of human rights defender **Nasrin Soutodeh**.

Persecution of independent journalists increased in 2012 and there were more than 15 cases of journalists and bloggers arbitrarily arrested and detained during the year simply for exercising their right to receive and disseminate information. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, the number of journalists who have been in detention since 2009 has reached 47 in 2012, with **Iran** ranking second in the world in its level of persecution of journalists.

Attacks on international media outlets increased with the Iranian authorities specifically targeting the Persian Services of the **BBC** and **Voice of America**. In December the Iranian Judiciary and the Ministry of Intelligence stepped up their harassment and surveillance of the families of Iranians working for the Persian Service in particular to coerce them to ask their relatives to stop working for the **BBC**. There were also reports of blocking the transmission of foreign broadcast in **Iran**. The Iranian measures against the **BBC** came apparently following the screening of a documentary titled Forced Confessions.

Minorities in **Iran** continued to face discrimination and persecution and other human rights abuses including deprivation of civil, religious, cultural and social rights were on the increase. The Ahwaz Arabs, Kurds and Christians took the brunt of these abuses.



On 11 October, five Kurdish political activists, Mr. **Ahmad Tamouee**, Mr. **Yousef Kakeh Meimi**, Mr. **Jahangir Badouzadeh**, Mr. **Ali Ahmad Soleiman**, and Mr. **Mostafa Ali Ahmad**, were detained and subsequently charged among other things with contacting the office of the UN Special Rapporteur on **Iran**, reporting on prison conditions to human rights organizations, propaganda against the regime, and contacting the pro-reform *Newroz* TV, according to the International Campaign for Human Rights in **Iran**.

Dozens of Ahwazi Arab activists were arrested during the year and a number of those held since April 2011 were sentenced to long terms of imprisonment. There were also reports of the execution of Ahwazi Arabs. At least 600 executions were carried out in **Iran** in 2012, according to Amnesty International. Among those sentenced were Mr. **Teh Hayderian**, 28; Mr. **Nasser Heydarian**, 21; Mr. **Abbas Heydarian**, 24; and Mr. **Ali Sharifi**, 25; all from the Mollashieh neighbourhood, who were each sentenced to 10 years in prison.

Two other political activists Mr. **Amir Moavi**, 24; and Mr. **Abbas Heydarin**, 26; were sentenced respectively to 38 and 18 years in prison in addition to being exiled to the northern Province of Mazandaran where they will serve their sentences. The activists were arrested following protests in Ahvaz in April 2011 during which 12 people were killed and 20 others wounded. Family members of those sentenced stated that they were convicted of murdering an Iranian security officer and they had been tortured and unfairly tried before a revolutionary court.

Persecution of Christians continued in **Iran**. In 2012 there were 300 Christians detained arbitrarily across the country, according to the UN Special Rapporteur on **Iran**. There were severe restrictions on religious practice for members of the Christian churches and the restriction on the building of churches, which was introduced in 1979, remained in force.

Iraq

The situation of human rights in **Iraq** remained grave during the year. There were serious violations of the right to freedom of expression and assembly. Attacks on journalists and media professionals continued to be a major concern. Thousands of civilians were killed or wounded during the year as a result of attacks perpetrated by armed groups. There were reports of persecution of minorities in the country and women continued to face gender-based violence and other forms of discrimination.

Peaceful protests during the year were met with repression including the use of excessive force by police and security forces. Demonstrators and advocates of democratic reforms were targeted, with the government accusing those behind the protests of being troublemakers. An alarming number of people were executed during the year and hundreds of civilians and members of law enforcement forces were killed as a result of sectarian violence and assassinations. There were signs of an increasing polarization of the Iraqi community based on political lines, and the political crisis engulfing the country was on-going at the end of the year.

There were reports of torture and ill-treatment of political prisoners in secret detention centres and an increase of the population of people held in Iraqi prisons. In March, a former guard of ousted Vice President **Tariq Al-Hashimi** died in custody in a police station in Kurdistan amid allegations of torture and ill-treatment. Government promises to close secret detention centres remained unfulfilled at the end of the year.

Journalists and media workers were the subject of killing, arbitrary arrest and detention, intimidation, harassment, and other forms of persecution. Dozens of journalists faced these threats for reasons related to the practice of their profession, including reporting on issues related to accountability and corruption.

Among those targeted was a journalist affiliated to *Salaheddin Satellite TV* who was killed on 2 April in Tikrit in Salaheddin province as a result of a bomb which targeted his car. He was one of at least three journalists killed during the year.

Among several journalists arbitrarily arrested and detained during the year was the President of the Journalists' Union in Wassit Governorate, Mr **Ali Al-Fayadh**. He was arrested on 15 January by agents belonging to the Ministry of Interior's Facilities Protection Services (**FPS**) for his alleged disclosure of information related to the dismissal of employees of the Ministry of Interior. He dismissed the reasons for his arrest as unfounded and told the Iraqi Journalist Freedoms Observatory that the information alleged to have been leaked by him had already been published by other media outlets.

Another journalist arbitrarily arrested and detained was Ms. **Zakiya Al-Mazouri** who was apprehended by security forces on 17 April 2012 at a checkpoint in Missan Governorate as she was on her way back from conducting interviews with officials in the Governorate. She was detained for several hours and released after the intervention of politicians from the area. **Zakiya Al-Mazouri** and members of her family had been the subject of previous threats and intimidation including the attempted kidnapping earlier in the year of her three sons.



At the end of 2012 dozens of Iraqi and foreign media institutions faced the threat of closure after the National Communications and Media Commission issued an order in May to be approved by the Ministry of Interior for such media outlets to be banned. Other restrictions on freedom of expression and the media included the introduction of an information technology crimes law, pending parliamentary approval. If it becomes law those using the Internet and other social media networks may face increased risks of prosecution. The draft legislation provides for life imprisonment for certain offences, some of which, such as posing threat to the country's military and security interests are broadly defined.

Violations against women and minorities in the country were widely reported during 2012. Women continued to suffer from gender-based human rights violations including domestic violence, 'honour' crimes and trafficking. Violations of women's rights were exacerbated by the deteriorating security situation and the difficulty of reaching the victims of such violations. Patterns of violations of women's rights were persistent in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region and other parts of the country. In a positive development however, government measures to combat violence against women included the adoption by the parliament in April of a law on trafficking.

Violations of the human rights of minorities in the country included the killing in Kirkuk on 8 January of a **Turkoman** community leader and the killing on 7 March by a car bomb in Tal Afar district of 23 civilians from the **Turkoman** community. The authorities were reported to have investigated these killings with a view to combating discrimination and educating people on tolerant co-existence.

Issues of tolerance and co-existence were highlighted by complaints from the Christian community in Kurdistan about the content of an Islamic textbook, which they regarded as being harmful to Christians. Following investigations by the Kurdistan Regional Government (**KRG**), the textbook was withdrawn from bookshops.

There were a number of positive human rights developments in the country during the year. In January, the **KRG** approved a Human Rights Action Plan for the region as part of the National Action Plan. In February, **Iraq** became a state party to the International Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The year also witnessed the appointment of commissioners for the country's Independent High Commission for Human Rights.

KUWAIT

The **Bedoon** (stateless) community rights advocates in **Kuwait** continued their campaign during the year to establish the rights of this minority including ending discrimination and granting nationality to tens of thousands of **Bedoon** in the country. Violations of the right to freedom of expression increased during the year. Women's rights in **Kuwait** moved a step forward in 2012 adding to the achievements made in previous years.

Peaceful protests organized by advocates of **Bedoon** rights were met with the use of excessive force by police and the arrest of a number of activists. In November, **Bedoon** rights advocates **Yousif Al-Zhairy**, **Khaled Al-Battah**, and **Abdalkarim Al-Fadhli**, who was already facing charges in relation to his human rights activism, were arrested along with others. They were held in connection with a demonstration held by thousands of **Bedoon** in Al-Jahra neighbourhood in the suburbs of **Kuwait** city.

Promises made by the government through its Central Commission for Illegal Residents to grant citizenship and access to other benefits to thousands of **Bedoon** remained unfulfilled in 2012. As a result, up to 180,000 of **Bedoon** remain stateless and deprived of their right to work, education and medical services.

Expression of opinion deemed to be critical of the country's rulers continued to be an offence punishable by Kuwaiti law. In June, **Mr. Hamad Al-Naqi** was sentenced to 19 years in prison with hard labour having been convicted of insulting Islam and inciting sectarianism. He was charged with sending messages through his twitter account which were deemed to be hostile to Islam. **Hamad Al-Naqi** denied the charges and stated that offending messages were posted on his twitter account after it had been hacked. The messages were also deemed to be critical of the Saudi and Bahraini rulers. This is one of about 300 cases related to freedom of expression involving bloggers and other activists, currently facing prosecution in **Kuwait**.

Former parliamentarian Mr. **Musallam Al-Barrak**, is facing prosecution for remarks he made during a demonstration in October which were considered by the authorities to be critical of the Kuwaiti Amir. He was briefly detained and charged with "undermining the status of the Amir". He was released on bail of US\$35,500. The arrest of the opposition figure triggered angry demonstrations by thousands of his supporters when the prosecution ordered that he be remanded in custody for ten days. Police used tear gas and stun grenades against the demonstrators and arrested a number of them.

In September blogger Mr. **Abdalaziz Bou Hamid** was arrested by the Kuwaiti authorities on allegations of defaming Ministry of Interior officials. He was arrested and handcuffed after two hours of interrogation at Salhiya police station in **Kuwait** city on charges of swearing at a police officer. The claims made by the police officer and refuted by eyewitnesses took place when **Abdalaziz Bou Hamid** was taking part in an anti-government sit-in protest in Alerada square in **Kuwait** city. The Ministry of Interior considered the sit-in to be a public order offence and a security threat.

Attacks on freedom of expression during the year included the closure in December of the privately owned pro-opposition *Al-Yaom* TV channel by the Ministry of Information which withdrew the channel's license for infringing administrative regulations. This followed the suspension earlier in the year of the *Al-Dar* newspaper. The paper was accused of inciting sectarian strife and harming national unity in relation to articles published in the paper.

In October 2012, the Kuwaiti authorities threatened further restrictions on the right to freedom of assembly by activating a 1979 regulation banning the gathering of more than 20 people in a public space. The move, condemned by international human rights organizations as a violation of the right to freedom of assembly as guaranteed by Kuwaiti laws, came shortly after mass anti-government demonstrations were held in different parts of **Kuwait** city in protests against measures curbing electoral rights and political participation. Such rights have been enjoyed to date by the Kuwaiti people, in contrast to those of the neighbouring states.

The peaceful mass demonstrations in October 2012 were met with excessive force at the hands of the authorities including the use of teargas and stun grenades.

Women's rights in **Kuwait** moved a step forward in 2012 adding to the achievements already made in this area including the gaining in 2005 of the right of women to vote and be elected and **Kuwait's** ratification in 1994 of the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (**CEDAW**). In April 2012, a court annulled a decision by the Ministry of Justice to bar women from entry-level legal positions allowing candidates to become prosecutors. But despite this and previous achievements Kuwaiti women continue to face gender-based discrimination in employment and in public life.

Despite achievements made in terms of rights gained by Kuwaiti civil society organizations and human rights defenders, there were reports of restrictions on the right to freedom of association during the year. Human rights defenders from neighbouring states including **Saudi Arabia** and the **UAE** were denied entry into the country or prevented from holding meetings in relation to their legitimate and peaceful human rights work in the region.



In March 2012 the Kuwaiti Ministry of Interior denied permission to the **Al-Nahdha** Youth Forum to convene a conference in **Kuwait**. Among those scheduled to take part in the function were Saudi human rights defenders Ms. **Hala Al-Dosari** and Mr. **Waleed Sulais**. **Al-Nahdha** Youth Forum had held two previous similar events in Manama and Doha without restrictions. In February prominent **UAE** human rights defender Mr. **Ahmed Mansoor** was held for several hours at **Kuwait** city airport and subsequently denied entry into the county. He was interrogated by the Kuwaiti security on his human rights activism, and his opinion regarding the political situation in **Kuwait**, before being deported back to the **UAE**.

OMAN

In the Sultanate of **Oman** 2012 witnessed a surge in the use of the Information Technology Crimes Law and the penal code to punish human rights defenders for their peaceful activism to promote human rights in the country which included calls for democratic and political reform. Numerous human rights defenders were arbitrarily arrested and detained and brought to courts in unfair trials. Peaceful protesters, who attempted to assemble publicly to express grievances about the lack of political participation and democratic representation, were faced with repression including the excessive use of force by police.

Legal and administrative restrictions imposed on freedom of association, including the setting up of human rights NGOs, continued to be imposed stringently. As a result many human rights defenders have resorted to the use of the Internet and social media networks to deal with issues related to human rights including demands for freedom of association and expression in the country. Human rights defenders in **Oman** were also the subject of smear campaigns by government supporters as well as by members of their own families and clans. Other repressive measures against human rights defenders included arbitrary detention, malicious prosecution and unfair trials.

At least 20 human rights defenders were brought to trial during the year on charges of insulting the ruler of the country and committing information technology crimes in reference to their use of the Internet and social media networks for human rights work. Among them were Mrs. **Basma Al-Kiyumi**, Ms. **Basema Al-Rajhi**, Ms. **Habiba Al-Hanaei** and Mr. **Saeed Al-Hashmi**. In addition to judicial harassment, human rights defenders faced other risks such as losing jobs, the imposition of economic restrictions such as lack of access to financial services, and being prohibited from establishing private businesses.



During the year human rights defenders in **Oman** were under surveillance by the security services and many were summoned by the authorities for questioning without notice. Those in touch with international human rights NGOs were particularly targeted in media smear campaigns and were often dubbed as traitors. Among them were Mr. **Said Jaddad** and Mr. **Salem Al-Towayah**. Human rights defenders also faced travel bans and risked having their identity documents confiscated.

Human rights defenders stepped up the use of social media networks during the year to promote issues related to good governance and to expose institutional corruption. But these moves were met with repressive measures on the part of the government, in an attempt to curb an increase in criticism, by blocking access to the Internet and social media, judicial harassment and imprisonment. Internet sites operated by human rights groups are under surveillance and those regarded to be critical of the government were blocked.

The Omani authorities are now waging a vicious electronic and digital war against human rights defenders in the face of the increasing use of the Internet to circumvent restriction on traditional means of the freedom of association and expression. Measures adopted by the government included hijacking of websites, closing down **Facebook** pages and blocking email addresses.

Human rights defenders were also banned from writing for newspapers. Journalists and bloggers were targeted, having already been forced to exercise self-censorship in order to avoid government reprisals. Among those were blogger **Mukhtar Mohamed Al-Hanaei** who was sentenced in September by the Muscat Court of First Instance to one year in prison on charges of insulting the Sultan and violating the information technology law. In October the government amended the Press and Publication Law introducing further restrictions on publishing, including on the Internet and social media networks, of any material perceived as being harmful to state security.

Numerous human rights defenders were handed down sentences based on their **Facebook** and Twitter posts, allegedly criticizing the Omani ruler. In July Ms. **Habibah Al-Hinaei**, Mr. **Ismael Al-Mikbaly**, Mr. **Yacob Al-Kharusi** and two other human rights defenders were sentenced for “insulting the sultan” through postings on their social media pages. The three human rights defenders were arrested in May, without a warrant, and held incommunicado. They are the co-founders of the Omani Group for Human Rights, whose website was blocked shortly after launching in May.



A handful of women human rights defenders who ventured into the public domain in defiance of the authorities and a discriminatory conservative society, were targeted to deter and punish them. Those particularly pursued were Ms. **Habiba Al-Hanaei**, Mrs. **Basmah Al-Kiyumi**, Ms. **Basema Al-Rajhi**, and Ms. **Tayba Al-Mi'awali**. Apart from punishment for their human rights activism these women faced gender-based human rights violations and threats as they were regarded as an affront to traditional arrangements regarding the status and behaviour of women within Omani society. Part of the violations directed against women human rights defenders during the year originated from within the family especially brothers and other male relatives.

QATAR

In **Qatar** freedom of association and expression continued to be severely restricted during 2012 and the absence of authorized human rights NGOs and independent media outlets contributed to the paucity of information related to the status of human rights in the country. While Qatari government operated or sponsored media institutions such as *AlJazeera* TV enjoyed freedom in reporting world affairs, they remained conspicuously silent on matters related to human rights violations taking place in **Qatar**.

The government of **Qatar**, while actively involved in promoting change within the context of the on-going uprising in the Arab world in countries like **Syria**, turned a deaf ear to calls for political reform within **Qatar** and in neighbouring **Bahrain**, and dealt repressively with any vestige of dissent within its own territory. A prominent Qatari poet who glorified the Arab spring through his poetry was sent to prison for a poem deemed to be critical of the ruling family. Mr. **Mohammad Aldeeb Al-Ajami** was subsequently sentenced to life imprisonment, reduced to 15 years on appeal in February 2013.

In addition to the existence of a tight policy of control over freedom of expression and media reporting and legal constraints already in operation, there were moves during the year, to introduce further legal restrictions such as providing for the arrest of journalists without a court order. The proposed legislative amendments are meant to curtail the potential rise in criticism of the Qatari Emirate and its “friendly states” and to incriminate dissenting journalists and human rights defenders.

The presences of the above restrictions as well as the fear of government reprisals and the risk of losing jobs often compel journalists to exercise self-censorship in matters regarding the Qatari Emirate and its “friendly states”. New legal restrictions were introduced in 2012 to the detriment of freedom of expression in the country.



A press and publications law was approved by the Qatari Advisory Council in June pending endorsement by the government. The new law criminalises writings and broadcasts construed to be harmful to the relations between **Qatar** and its friendly states. Given the restrictions the law provides for in relation it may also have negative implications for the work of independent human rights defenders in the country.

The peaceful and legitimate work of human rights defenders and political reformist continued to be restricted, censored and denigrated by large sections of a traditional Qatari community. Risks and threats faced by these groups during the year included arbitrary arrest and detention, surveillance by security forces, denial of employment, and the threat of revocation of nationality. Prominent human rights defender, Mr. **Sultan Al-Khulaifi** was a victim of arbitrary arrest and detention in 2011, who nevertheless continued to promote human rights in **Qatar** by means of establishing an unauthorized NGO.

As mentioned earlier, real and apparent withdrawal of nationality as a form of punishment to deter government criticism continued to be used during the year. This is facilitated, among other things, by a nationality law that classifies nationals in a discriminatory manner and is interpreted and implemented at the will of the monarchic rulers. Thousands of people, including members of the **Bedoon** community and children of peaceful advocates of government reform, continued to suffer during the year as a result of not having the national identity or due to the withdrawal of their nationalities during previous years. During the year a number of children continued to be treated degradingly as a result of their parents' human rights activities, suffering discrimination including by having their right to education and other social services severely restricted.

SAUDI ARABIA

In **Saudi Arabia**, freedom of association and expression continued to be heavily restricted during the year. The country does not recognize civil and political rights enshrined in international human rights laws and is ruled by an extreme version of Shari'a law. Dozens of human rights defenders faced persecution for their legitimate and peaceful human rights work including arbitrary detention and unfair trials.

Founders and members of Saudi human rights organizations continued to work unauthorized in defiance of restrictions imposed on freedom of association. As a result they faced arbitrary arrest, harassment and unfair trial. Founders and members of the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association (**ACPRA**) were targeted in particular. **ACPRA** founding members Dr. **Mohammad Al-Qahtani** and Dr. **Abdullah Al-Hamid** were the subject of persecution and an unfair trial on charges relating to their peaceful and legitimate campaigning for the respect of human rights in **Saudi Arabia**.



Charges brought against them included providing false information about **Saudi Arabia** to the **UN** regarding the situation of human rights in the country; inciting international organizations against the Kingdom of **Saudi Arabia**; questioning the integrity of religious leaders in the country; insulting state officials and questioning their integrity; rebelling against the King and his heir apparent; and preparing and storing information detrimental to public order. Both human rights defenders have also been banned from travelling abroad.

The campaign for women's rights and their empowerment continued in the country throughout the year. In October, hundreds of women staged a demonstration in the eastern town of Al-Awamiya to protest violations against women including sexual harassment of female students. The year witnessed the enhancement of an electronic system for the tracking of the movement of Saudi women across the broader. According to the new system, men are notified of the whereabouts of their wives and female relatives when they leave the country. Male 'guardians' of women are now notified of the whereabouts abroad of their female dependents even if they do not request such information.

Human rights defender Ms. **Samar Badawi** received the International Women of Courage Award from the **US** State Department in recognition for her campaigning for women's rights in **Saudi Arabia**. In an unprecedented development in the country, women human rights defenders Ms. **Samar Badawi**, Ms. **Manal Al-Sharif** and Ms. **Nassima Al-Saddah** filed a law suit against the Ministry of Interior for banning women from driving cars in the country. **Saudi Arabia** is the only country in the world where women are banned from driving.

Criticism, real or perceived, of the monarchic system of government or the religious establishment or practices based on the Wahabi version of Shari'a is prohibited and entails severe punishment. The authorities are particularly hostile to criticism carried by the media including on social networks. Despite restrictions imposed, the widespread use of social media networks including Twitter and Facebook in **Saudi Arabia** increased significantly during 2012. At least three human rights defenders were incarcerated during the year because their writings or blogs on social media networks were deemed to be critical of the religious establishment.

In April, the Specialized Criminal Court in Riyadh sentenced prominent human rights defender Mr. **Mohammad Saleh Al-Bajadi** to four years in prison to be followed by a travel ban of five years effective from the date of his release. He was tried in camera and denied access to his defence lawyers. The sentencing is related to his human rights work including taking part in a protest in Riyadh in 2011 calling for the release of political prisoners. **Mohammad Saleh Al-Bajadi** is a founding member of **ACPRA**.



In an apparent attempt to stop growing human rights activism and the endeavours of human rights defenders to ascertain their right to freedom of expression, the authorities introduced additional legal restrictions. Among them was the use of January 2012 Executive Regulation relating to electronic publishing activities, introduced by the Ministry of Culture and Information to ensure that news and writing carried by Internet sites and social media networks are in conformity with the country's code of Shari'a. Many Internet sites have already been the subject of blocking. Freedom of expression and the press had already been the subject of restrictions included in the country's 2000 Press and Publication Law which penalizes, among other things, any material or statement which contravene the country's version of Shari'a law, or may harm the image of government officials or religious guardians.

Moreover, freedom of expression is negatively affected by the Saudi Shura Council's policy of acting as a gatekeeper of the interests of the ruling family, and its negative attitude towards individuals' criticism of government policies including through the use of social media networks and blog spots. In December, prominent novelist and blogger Dr. **Turki Al-Hamad** was arbitrarily arrested and detained by the Saudi authorities for posting a comment on his Twitter account which clerics considered to be blasphemous. His supporters sent a petition signed by 500 individuals, including human rights defenders, to Crown Prince **Salman Bin Abdalaziz** calling for his "immediate and unconditional" release. In December Saudi human rights defender Mr. **Raef Badawi** was referred to trial at the Saudi General Court on charges of "establishing a site on the Internet to undermine public security and mock Islamic religious personalities". **Raef Badawi** was arrested in June on charges originally related to his involvement with the Saudi Liberal Network which he co-founded with others.

Unauthorized public assemblies including demonstrations are prohibited in **Saudi Arabia**, and those who organize or take part in such events are punished by arrest, detention and prosecution. During the year, the Eastern region of **Saudi Arabia** bore the brunt of the government repression due to protests and demonstration calling for political participation and the ending of discrimination against the minorities in the country. Human rights defenders were targeted and singled out as perpetrators of trouble. There were reports of arbitrary arrest and detention and excessive use of force leading to killings in the Eastern region of the country. A number of protesters were referred to trial for taking part in protests. Other restrictions on freedom of association included the refusal by the authorities to register the newly established human rights group Adala in the Eastern region.

SYRIA

In **Syria** the on-going uprising against the government turned into civil war leading to a rapid increase in the number of civilians killed. At the end of the year the number of people killed stood at 60,000, according to the **UN**. Hundreds of thousands of people, including women and children, were either internally displaced or sought refuge in neighbouring countries including **Turkey, Lebanon, Iraq** and **Jordan**.

There were reports of the rape of women who were fleeing the conflict. Efforts by the United Nations and the Arab League to negotiate a peaceful resolution to the conflict remained without progress at the end of the year.

Monitoring, surveillance, and blocking of online communication increased during the year and the authorities deployed additional resources to counter the increasing use of the Internet by human rights defenders and peaceful protesters. Human rights work and cyber activism were met with severe reprisal on the part of the government. Repressive measures used by the authorities included extra-judicial executions, torture, “disappearances”, home raids, forced disappearances, arbitrary arrest and incommunicado detention, starvation in detention, and unfair trials.

Additional measures used during the year to intimidate and blackmail human rights defenders and peaceful protesters, were taking family members hostage in lieu of those sought by the authorities. The Air Force Intelligence Department was often singled out as one of the main perpetrators of grave human rights violations throughout the year.

The authorities' crackdown on human rights defenders increased in 2012. Also targeted were Syrian humanitarian workers and doctors trying to provide assistance to war affected civilians. A number of prominent human rights defenders remained in detention at the end of the year including **Mazen Darwish**, head of the Syrian Centre for Media and Freedom of Expression (**SCM**), arbitrarily arrested and detained since 16 February. On 2 October 2012, a group of armed men in civilian clothes arrested human rights lawyer **Khalil Matouk**, executive director of the Syrian Centre for Legal Studies and Research, at a checkpoint positioned on the **Syria/Jordan** international Highway. Both human rights defenders were held incommunicado at the time of their incarceration.

A significant number of human rights defenders and political activists were forced to flee the country to escape persecution and government reprisals. Many of those had already been in detention or suffered other forms of repression perpetrated by the authorities. Among those was prominent human rights defender Mr. **Abdulla Al-Khalil** who managed to flee the county along with his family. He was a victim of prolonged persecution including incommunicado detention and torture.

United Arab Emirates (UAE)

The year witnessed a dramatic increase in the repression of advocates of political and civil rights in the UAE leading to the arrest and detention of dozens of human rights defenders and political activists including lawyers and academics. Tight restrictions on freedom of expression and association were compounded by the introduction of additional legal measures to curb the use of Internet and social media networks by human rights defenders and advocates of political reform.

Two human rights defenders were among at least 66 peaceful political activists who remained in detention at the end of the year, accused of forming a secret organisation plotting to change the monarchic system of government in the UAE. The detainees were initially held incommunicado and there were reports of torture and ill-treatment to compel them to incriminate themselves. Among those reported to have been tortured and ill-treated during the year, allegedly in an attempt to compel them to make confessions, were Mr. **Ahmad Al-Suwaydi**, Mr. **Abdallah Al-Jadani**, and Mr. **Musa'b Khalil Abboud**, as well as the son and son-in law of jailed human rights defender Dr. **Mohammed Al-Roken**.

Political detainees and their families were the subject of a vicious smear campaign led by pro government media, including the Saudi international *Al-Sharq Al-Awast* newspaper and social media networks. Those in detention were accused of undermining state security and being members of a branch of the Muslim Brotherhood organisation plotting to destabilize the UAE. Family members of the detainees were also targeted in the smear and intimidation campaign with some of them being denied access to their bank accounts.

Human rights lawyers Dr. **Mohammed Al-Roken** and Dr. **Mohammed Al-Mansori**, well-known for their human rights work, remained in detention without trial, accused of plotting to change the government. Their detention was apparently part of an ongoing crackdown on human rights defenders in the UAE which had previously led to the detention and trial of a group of human rights defenders also known as the **UAE5** in 2011.

At least two of the **UAE5** continued to face persecution following their release as a result of a presidential amnesty: Mr. **Ahmad Mansour** is currently facing a smear campaign, including being accused of being an Iranian agent, in what is reported to be an attempt to deter him from continuing his human rights work. He was also physically assaulted during the year and barred from travelling. His fellow member of the **UAE5**, advocate of **Bedoon** rights Mr. **Ahmed Abd Al-Khaliq** was deported in July to **Thailand** after a period of detention by UAE immigration authorities. The threat of repressive measures and the on-going intimidation campaign led many human rights defenders in the country to keep a low profile to escape reprisals.



The **UAE** authorities stepped up their crackdown on social media networks and online discussion forums used by human rights defenders. Apart from blocking these networks the government introduced a new information technology law apparently to counter the increasing use by government critics of cyber technology, having been denied access to government and private media outlets.

The year witnessed an increasing use of the provisions of the nationality law including revocation of nationality by the authorities to intimidate human rights defenders and political activists. A number of individuals had their nationality revoked and the **Bedoon** community in the country remained under constant fear of deportation.

While the government was reported to have signed an agreement with the **Comoros** Island and as a potential recipient of **Bedoon** from the **UAE** in return for economic favours, apparently no **Bedoon** have yet been sent there. Instead the **UAE** is deporting Bedoon to third countries such as **Thailand**, as illustrated by the case of human rights defender **Ahmad Abd Al-Khaliq** featured above.

In addition to campaigns led by international human rights organizations, the **UAE** human rights record was scrutinized, among others, by the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (**OHCHR**). The **OHCHR** criticized the **UAE** for targeting human rights defenders, including by the use of harassment, travel bans, termination of employment, arrests, revocation of nationality, denaturalization and deportation, to restrict their peaceful and legitimate human rights activism.

YEMEN

In an apparent move to establish transitional justice, Yemeni President **Abdrabbu Mansur Hadi** issued a decree setting up a commission of inquiry to investigate human rights violations including those committed since the start of the popular uprising in 2011. Efforts in the direction of transitional justice were, however, marred by on-going serious violations of human rights committed during the year by the Yemeni authorities and armed groups resulting in the killing of many civilians in different parts of the country. The year was also marked by the failure to hold those responsible for past human rights violations accountable for their acts.

There were efforts by the authorities to enhance the rule of law and the respect of human rights not least through allowing the Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights to establish a country office in **Yemen**.

Calls for branch and root political and economic changes in the country including security sector reform and ending past impunities and bringing perpetrators of human rights violations to justice failed to materialize during the year. The granting of immunity to former President **Ali Abdulla Saleh** and his entourage was another major cause of concern in 2012. These and other factors added fuel to calls by factions of the Southern Movement for Self Determination for the people of the former southern Democratic Republic of **Yemen** citing, among other grievances, political marginalization, exploitation of resources of the region by the central government, and inequitable share of wealth, to the detriment of the people of the southern part of **Yemen**.

Human rights violations committed by armed groups, including those affiliated with Al-Qa'eda and emerging violent Salafist formations increased during the year. More than 500 people including members of the regular army were killed by armed groups in the southern part of **Yemen** particularly in the governorate of Abyan. The Salafist Ansar Al-Sharia group was responsible for a significant part of these atrocities including killing of women and crucifixion of men whose way of behaviour they regarded as an affront to Shari'a.

Human rights defenders and political activists who have been in the lead in monitoring and documenting abuses and communicating information to the outside world were targeted for their legitimate and peaceful work. In addition to heavy restrictions imposed on their work they were also the target of unaligned entities and extremists.

Women human rights defender Ms. **Huda Jaafar** was the subject of a barrage of abuse on the social media network due to her opinions. Huda Jaafar is a campaigner for women's rights in **Yemen** including ending of all forms of gender-based violence against women. Mr. **Ali Al-Daylami**, the General Co-ordinator of the Yemeni Organization for the Defence of Rights and Democratic Freedoms, had his passport confiscated by Yemeni immigration officials at Sana'a airport while he was on his way to attend a human rights conference in Cairo. Ms **Bushra Al-Maqtari**, a prominent woman activist and writer, was the subject of a campaign of harassment and intimidation by conservative Islamists following a fatwa issued against her by a cleric accusing her of anti-Islamism and apostasy. This was followed by a smear campaign against her in mosques and other religious institutions as well as intimidation by people demonstrating outside her home. Facebook and other social media networks were used to incite people against her as well as, including calling for her nationality to be revoked.



Gulf Center For Human Rights

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