



**Hear their Voices:
Alarming Times for Human Rights Defenders in the
Gulf Region & Neighbouring Countries**

Gulf Centre for Human Rights 2015 Annual Report

February 2015



“As human rights defenders you are like sailors and as sailors you are fighting the waves and watching the wind... One does not give up and abandon his ship because the wind is moving against him, what’s important is that you have your compass and you know your destination.”

(Detained human rights defender and GCHR founder, **Abdulahdi Al-Khawaja**,
December 2014)

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This is the third annual report of the Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR), which was founded in 2011 by human rights defenders from the region. The GCHR documents the human rights environment for human rights defenders working 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. Syria, while not typically considered a Gulf country, is included because the GCHR believes it is essential to document the ongoing large-scale human rights atrocities taking place in a country neighbouring the Gulf region and because the conflict there has significant regional implications. This report highlights the work of the GCHR throughout 2014 and the main issues which human rights defenders face as they carry out their peaceful and legitimate human rights activities.

In 2014, the situation for human rights defenders in the Gulf region and its neighbouring countries continued to deteriorate. Human rights defenders are targeted, harassed, arrested, detained, imprisoned and ill-treated as a direct result of their human rights work. Many human rights defenders remain in detention where they are subjected to torture and appalling conditions. Rather than supporting human rights defenders and promoting universal human rights, governments in the region are using new anti-terror laws or cyber-crime laws, as well as increased cooperation among Gulf States, to restrict the work of human rights defenders.

GCHR Activities:

In 2014, the GCHR issued 138 appeals relating to more than 200 human rights defenders in the ten countries in which it works. It published five reports including its annual report. In January it published a report on torture in Oman following a mission to the country in October 2013. During 2014, the GCHR undertook missions to the UAE, Kuwait, Iran and Iraq. A mission report on Kuwait published in March documented the restrictions on freedom of expression and assembly and the environment in which human rights defenders operate. In December, the GCHR published a mission report on the situation of human rights defenders in Iraqi Kurdistan which outlined the precarious situation of civil society organisations, minority rights and the restrictions on freedom of expression.

The GCHR also provided direct support to human rights defenders, including grants to 21 human rights defenders. It trained over 120 human rights defenders, including on digital security, security generally, the use of UN mechanisms, the use of social media to promote human rights, transitional justice, stress management and well-being, and mechanisms for investigating and documenting human rights violations. The GCHR ran various workshops throughout the year including in Lebanon, Iraq,

Iran, Turkey and Egypt. Since 2011, a total of 350 human rights defenders have participated in GCHR-run workshops.

The GCHR is a member of several working groups that include leading human rights organisations. It works closely and in co-operation with the main human rights organisations that are working in the Gulf region. The aim of these groups and bi-lateral co-operation is to co-ordinate efforts in order to enhance advocacy and protection for human rights defenders at risk in the region.

GCHR staff and representatives attended international conferences and meetings, including those organised by the United Nations, European Union and other institutions. Many advocacy meetings were held with states members of the UN Human Rights Council to highlight the massive human rights violations in the Gulf countries and encourage them to put more pressure on authorities in the region. The GCHR also organised many meetings with the various UN mechanisms such as the working groups and special rapporteurs to brief them about recent cases of human rights defenders at risk in the region.

In June 2014, the GCHR, Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS), Human Rights Watch, International Service for Human Rights (ISHR) and World Alliance for Citizen participation (CIVICUS) organised a side event at the 26th session of the Human Rights Council to launch a new report on the situation of human rights defenders in Kuwait, to discuss the space in which civil society operate in Qatar and how the mechanisms of the UN Human Rights Council could be maximised to protect human rights defenders against reprisals.

In September, the GCHR together with the CIHRS, CIVICUS, Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association (ACPRA), Women's Driving Campaign and National Committee for Monitoring Violations (NCV) organised a side event at the 27th session of the UN Human Rights Council which highlighted the Women's Driving Campaign in Saudi Arabia and again outlined the situation of human rights defenders in Kuwait. It also officially launched its report entitled [OHCHR, the Human Rights Council and the Gulf Countries: An Analysis of actions undertaken since 2011](#). The report examined action taken by UN mechanisms since 2011 in relation to the six Gulf Cooperation Council member states, including statements made, press releases issued, country visits made and actions by Treaty bodies as well as discussions at the UNHRC.

In November 2014, GCHR was among six leading human rights NGOs that held a discussion in Washington, DC on human rights violations by Gulf countries that are partners of the United States in the fight against the Islamic State. "Criminalisation of Dissent in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates" put the focus on countries which routinely jail those who advocate democratic reform and protection of human rights, while ignoring or encouraging those who promote violence and

sectarianism. The event was organised by the GCHR in partnership with Americans for Democracy and Human Rights in Bahrain, Human Rights Watch, Human Rights First, the Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED) and CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation.

The GCHR has been tracking the use of so-called “anti-terrorism” laws to persecute human rights defenders in countries across the Gulf, including Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. For example, an anti-terrorism law approved in the UAE in August 2014 labels certain offences as terrorist even without a proven link to violence, and has already been used to convict a human rights defender. These laws can be used to silence and jail peaceful pro-democracy protesters and human rights defenders.

Other alarming developments in the region include increased cooperation between Gulf countries so that GCC countries can arrest any Gulf national facing charges. The GCHR also joined other national and global human rights organisations in September to protest draft statutes drawn up by the League of Arab States (LAS) to create an Arab Court of Human Rights. As it stands, the court does not allow individuals to bring cases to the court, only member States. “The very *raison d'être* of a regional human rights court is to ensure individuals access to justice and to guarantee their rights to effective remedies and to reparation for violations,” said [the joint appeal](#).

Country Summaries:

The GCHR’s findings regarding the countries within its mandate are summarised below:

Bahrain

Human rights defenders in Bahrain continue to be subjected to intimidation, judicial harassment, arrest, detention and lengthy prison sentences. Freedom of expression is being increasingly restricted and on-line activists and women’s rights activists are targeted. Recommendations of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI) have been ignored by authorities, as have calls by the UN to release human rights defenders detained on fabricated charges. In 2014, the GCHR issued numerous appeals and updates on the cases of human rights defenders in Bahrain, including GCHR’s own staff and founders (**Maryam** and **Abdulahdi Al-Khawaja** and **Nabeel Rajab**), who were jailed in 2014. Open letters included a joint letter to King Hamad on the torture of detained human rights activists and to the newly appointed Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs calling for a shift in policy of the United Kingdom towards Bahrain.

Iran

The hopes of a better environment for civil society and human rights defenders following the election of President Hassan Rouhani did not materialise in 2014. Appeals documented the cases of human rights defenders, and women's rights activists in particular, who continue to face judicial harassment, violence and imprisonment as they strive to promote human rights in Iran. A number of cases centred around women human rights defenders and journalists arrested, many for protesting a lack of action in cases of women who were attacked with acid. Prominent human rights defender and lawyer **Nasrin Sotoudeh** was among those arrested. Iran also continued its pattern of jailing journalists; according to international media freedom NGOs, Iran continues to have one of the largest numbers of imprisoned journalists in the world.

Iraq

2014 saw a worsening of the conflict in Iraq and a deterioration of the human rights situation as attacks were carried out on civilians and human rights defenders by state and non-state actors. Further restrictions on freedom of speech were imposed by the government and human rights defenders and media workers continued to carry out their work under threat of arrest, intimidation and even death. The GCHR documented the killing of a journalist by a state official and the shocking public execution of a lawyer and women's human rights defender at the hands of Islamic State or the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). A GCHR report on the degenerating human rights environment in Iraqi Kurdistan and the restriction on freedom of speech and the media was published following a mission to the region.

Kuwait

Restrictions on the rights to freedom of expression and assembly and the failure to grant rights to the Bedoon community were the main features of the human rights situation in Kuwait in 2014. The GCHR issued appeals and updates relating to the arrest of those monitoring peaceful protests, ill-treatment in detention, and grossly unfair trials of human rights activists. In April, a mission report was published documenting the increasing restrictions on the right to freedom of expression and the on-going plight of the Bedoon people.

Oman

In 2014, Omani authorities restricted the rights to freedom of assembly using excessive force to break up protests and freedom of expression as human rights defenders, bloggers and media workers continued to be targeted. An amnesty granting pardon to activists in detention was unimplemented, with many activists still in prison at the end of 2014. Human rights defenders continue to work under fear of arrest and intimidation. The GCHR published appeals relating to incommunicado detention, judicial harassment, arrests and ill-treatment of activists. In March, the GCHR launched a report on its mission to the country in 2013, documenting the acts of torture inflicted on human rights defenders.

Qatar

Restrictions on freedom of expression and assembly continue to be the key features of human rights violations in Qatar. Human rights defenders face lengthy prison sentences on fabricated charges as a result of voicing their opinions. Anti-Cyber Crime legislation was enacted in September 2014, which further threatens to restrict freedom of expression, and it is feared that it may be employed to attempt to silence human rights defenders and to hinder their work. As well as issuing appeals, the GCHR made a submission to the UN Universal Periodic Review (UPR) on Qatar during 2014 outlining the situation of human rights defenders in the country.

Saudi Arabia

The situation of human rights defenders in Saudi Arabia is critical. Many remain in detention on fabricated charges where they are tortured and subjected to inhumane conditions. The right to freedom of expression continues to be violated and those expressing their opinions, on-line or through other media, face threats, arrest, trials and harassment as a result. The Anti-Cyber Crime Law enacted in 2013 is being applied arbitrarily against human rights activists. In a case that has inspired worldwide outrage, human rights defender **Raif Badawi** was sentenced to 10 years in prison and 1000 lashes after being detained for almost two years in connection with the creation of a critical website and his calls for reforms in the Kingdom. Women continue to remain second class citizens and those advocating for equal rights, including the right to drive, are relentlessly suppressed by the authorities, including through imprisonment.

Syria

During 2014, the conflict in Syria worsened leading to a further destabilisation of the environment in which human rights activists operate. Appeals were issued as human rights defenders were arrested, harassed and restrictions placed on freedom of expression. Human rights defenders, including members of the Syrian Centre for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM) and the Douma Four, remain in detention despite calls by the UN for their immediate release and continue to be subjected to ill-treatment and their families harassed.

United Arab Emirates

2014 saw a continuation in the targeting of human rights defenders and the imposition of restrictions on the right to freedom of expression and assembly in the UAE. On-line activists were arrested and given lengthy prison sentences. The Anti-Terrorism Law enacted in August 2014 has already been used against human rights defenders and it is feared that this legislation will be used increasingly as a tool to hinder their work. Many of the political prisoners known collectively as the UAE94 remain in detention and their families have been harassed. Under the new anti-terror law, human rights defender **Osama Al-Najar** was jailed for three years for calling for the release of his father, one of the UAE94, who he claims was tortured in prison. A British lawyer sent to the UAE by the GCHR was banned from the country for life.

Yemen

The exercise of the right to freedom of expression was met with threats, violence, arrests and defamation throughout 2014. Human rights defenders and journalists go about their work in a highly dangerous environment where government authorities as well as opponents attempt to silence them and hinder their work. The main focus of GCHR appeals on Yemen in 2014 was the restrictions placed on freedom of expression and the consequences faced by those who legitimately exercise that right.

2. COUNTRY REPORTS

Bahrain

Human rights defenders in Bahrain continue to be targeted, detained, ill-treated and suppressed as political unrest and human rights violations continue throughout the country. Key recommendations of the 2011 Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI) Report remain unimplemented, despite repeated promises made by the authorities to its allies and the UN, which included many human rights recommendations in its Universal Periodic Review in 2012.

In January 2014, the GCHR and the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights (BCHR) issued an appeal for the release of **Nabeel Rajab**, President of the BCHR and Deputy Secretary General of the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), following the rejection of a request for early release. He was released in May. He and his family were subjected to harassment as they travelled in July 2014. He was arrested again in October 2014 and charged with insulting the Ministry of Interior and the Bahrain Defence Forces on Twitter. He had returned the previous day from an advocacy tour in Europe, where he spoke about human rights abuses in Bahrain at the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, addressed the European Parliament in Brussels, and visited foreign ministries throughout Europe. He was released on bail on 2 November, then sentenced to six months in prison in January 2015, pending appeal in February 2015. He has been arrested and detained on many occasions in the past, and has suffered torture at the hands of the authorities as a direct result of his peaceful human rights work. Appeals were issued on his case throughout October, with over 100 organisations calling for his immediate and unconditional release in a statement published on 9 October.

April 2014 marked the third anniversary of the arrest of human rights defender, founder of the GCHR and former President of the BCHR **Abdulahdi Al-Khawaja**. The GCHR together with international and local civil society groups called for his immediate and unconditional release. In September 2012, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention concluded that throughout Al-Khawaja's arrest, detention, and trial, "the Government violated numerous international norms to the right to fair trial." The BICI further concluded that Al-Khawaja was subjected to torture and

inhumane treatment during his arrest and detention. Despite this he remains in detention in Jaw Prison.

In May 2014, the Court of Appeal upheld a 15 year prison sentence against human rights defender and board member of the Bahrain Youth Society for Human Rights (BYSHR) **Naji Fateel**, on charges of “establishing a terrorist group for the purpose of disturbing public security, disabling the constitution and law, preventing public institutions and authorities from performing their duties, attacking public and personal rights, and harming national unity.” The sentence was solely based on coerced confessions taken under torture and without thoroughly, and impartially investigating the allegations of torture which the defender was subjected to during his detention. He has been in detention since 2 May 2013.

On 24 August 2014, **Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja** declared an open-ended hunger strike “in protest against the continuation of arbitrary arrest and detention.” He refused all foods and liquids, except for water and any IV treatment during his hunger strike. He ended his 30-day hunger strike on 23 September 2014, out of concern for the health of other detained human rights defenders who were on hunger strike with him. The GCHR and the BCHR urged him to stop the hunger strike in a letter published on 16 September. Although he called off the hunger strike he warned that “this will not be the last hunger strike as long as the arbitrary detention continues.” On 1 September 2014, **Naji Fateel** announced the start of a hunger strike along with over 30 other prisoners at Jaw prison, including **Ahmed Abbas**, another imprisoned member of the BYSHR, in solidarity with Al-Khawaja. An appeal was issued on Fateel’s case on 1 September jointly with BCHR and details of his ill-treatment were raised with the authorities including allegations of severe torture, his placement in solitary confinement and lack of access to required medical attention.

On 9 June 2014, ahead of the UN Human Rights Council’s 26th Session, ten free speech and human rights organisations, including the GCHR, made a renewed call for the release of Bahraini journalists **Hussain Hubail** and **Qassim Zain Aldeen**, detained since the summer of 2013. Both were critical in their reporting of the Bahraini government, covered protests for local and international media and published on human rights issues. The charges against them include calling for an illegal gathering, inciting hatred against the regime and misuse of social media. Blogger **Mohammed Hassan** was also arrested but was subsequently released on bail and fled the country.

The same month, 46 States issued a joint statement at the UN Human Rights Council expressing concern over human rights violations in Bahrain, including long sentences for exercising the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association; the lack of sufficient guarantee of fair trial; the repression of demonstrations; the continued harassment and imprisonment of persons exercising their rights to freedom of opinion and expression; ill-treatment and torture in detention facilities; the arbitrary

deprivation of nationality without due process and insufficient accountability for human rights violations.

On 1 July, human rights defender **Dr. Saeed Al-Samahiji** was arrested at his home to serve a one-year prison sentence for “insulting the King”. The alleged insult had taken place at the funeral of a young protestor who had died as a result of excessive force used by Bahraini authorities where the human rights activist made a speech.

In July, BCHR and GCHR joined 29 organisations in sending a letter to the newly appointed Secretary of State for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Philip Hammond, urging a shift in UK policy towards the situation in Bahrain.

On 26 August 2014, the GCHR wrote jointly with 12 other human rights organisations to King Hamad of Bahrain regarding torture victims. The letter urged the Bahrain government to comply with its international treaty obligations to provide victims of torture with physical and psychological rehabilitation and in particular to allow and facilitate an independent assessment of the therapeutic needs of all persons who were mistreated during their detention by the Bahraini authorities, as confirmed by the findings of the BICI. It further called on the government of Bahrain to afford to all victims of torture and ill-treatment their right to redress in line with Bahrain’s obligations under the UN Convention Against Torture. With article 14 stating “each State Party shall ensure in its legal system that the victim of an act of torture obtains redress and has an enforceable right to fair and adequate compensation, including the means for as full rehabilitation as possible.”

In October 2012, the Committee Against Torture - a body of independent international experts who review state parties’ compliance with CAT - issued a general comment on article 14, stating that the term “redress” in article 14 encompasses the concepts of “effective remedy” and “reparation” and entails restitution, compensation, rehabilitation, satisfaction and guarantees of non-repetition. It called on the authorities to prioritise as a matter of urgency, the particular cases of the 13-high profile political detainees identified by the BICI as having been subjected to “a more discernible pattern of mistreatment” in detention and reiterated calls for their release and all those unjustly detained, namely **Hassan Mushaima, Ibrahim Sherif, Dr Abduljalil Al-Singace, Abdulwahab Hussein, Sheikh Saeed Merza Ahmed Al-Nouri, Sheikh Abdulhadi Abdulla Al-Makhdour, Mohamed Hassan Jawad, Mohamed Reda Ismail, Sheikh Abduljalil Al-Muqdad, Salah Abdulla Al-Khawaja, Sheikh Mohamed Habib Al-Muqdad, Merza Al-Mahrous and Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja.**

On 4 September, the GCHR met with the Danish Foreign Minister, Martin Lidegaard together with Amnesty International, BCHR, HRW, International Media Support and PEN International. At the meeting the organisations raised their concerns in relation to the health of **Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja** who holds dual nationalities for Bahrain and

Denmark and shared the latest information they had on his condition. The Minister shared the concerns and expressed his strong personal commitment to doing everything possible to secure **Al-Khawaja**'s immediate release on humanitarian grounds.

On 18 September, the GCHR issued an appeal on the case of **Ghada Jamsheer**, following her arrest on 15 September. A seven-day detention order was issued against her after she was interrogated by the Criminal Investigation Directorate on 9 September 2014 in relation to postings on Twitter about corruption at King Hamad University Hospital. **Jamsheer** is the President of the Women's Petition Committee (WPC), a network of Bahraini women human rights defenders who campaign for the codification of Bahrain's family laws and their reform. She is effectively banned from the national Bahrain media. Her online blog has been blocked in Bahrain since at least 2009.

On 29 November, International Women Human Rights Defender's Day, the GCHR issued another appeal with the BCHR on the case of **Ghada Jamsheer** who was arrested again just hours after she had been released following ten weeks in jail. The trumped up charge brought against her reportedly related to an alleged assault by her on a police officer in September however she was never informed of the case before. This is another example of the authorities using judicial harassment to hinder the work of human rights defenders.

On 28 October 2014, 40 organisations including the GCHR, called on the international community to publicly condemn the on-going crackdown on human rights defenders who face harassment, imprisonment, and forced exile for peacefully exercising their internationally recognised rights to freedom of expression and assembly in Bahrain, in advance of the elections on 22 November. The elections were boycotted by the opposition and dismissed by most people as a farce.

Attacks against human rights defenders and free expression by the Bahraini government have not only increased in frequency and severity, but have enjoyed public support from the ruling elite. On 3 September 2014, King Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa said he would fight "wrongful use" of social media by legal means. The BCHR documented 16 cases where individuals were imprisoned in 2014 for statements posted on social media platforms, particularly on Twitter and Instagram.

On 2 November the GHCR issued an appeal highlighting the plight of women human rights defenders in Bahrain. In particular the health of detained human rights defenders was raised as a concern, including that of **Zainab Al-Khawaja**, human rights activists and daughter of **Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja**, who was pregnant while in detention, and imprisoned protestor **Zahra Al-Shaikh** and her six-month-old baby, who needs special medical attention. Al-Shaikh was charged with illegal gathering, and has been arrested several times in violation to her right to freedom of assembly.

Zainab Al-Khawaja, who gave birth to a daughter in November 2014, was subjected to continuous judicial harassment in 2014 as she continued to promote and protect human rights in Bahrain as well as calling for the release of her father. In December, she was sentenced to three years in prison and a fine of nearly USD\$8,000 for tearing up a picture of the Bahrain monarch. While she is released on bail pending the hearing of her appeal, scheduled for June 2015, she is liable to be arrested at any time for other charges for which she has already been sentenced to prison. These related to “insulting a public officer,” “destroying public property” and “trespassing” as she attempted to seek information regarding her father who was on hunger strike in Jaw prison. In February 2014, while in detention the authorities attempted to fabricate new charges against her. Imprisoned since 27 February 2013, on charges relating to peaceful protesting, the Criminal Court issued a new four-month sentence against her in January 2014 in absentia.

On 1 December, **Maryam Al-Khawaja**, Director of Advocacy of the GCHR and daughter of Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja, was sentenced to one-year imprisonment, following trumped up charges relating to an alleged assault on a lieutenant and policewoman at the Bahrain International Airport. On 30 August, she had flown to Bahrain to visit her father who was on hunger strike and she was promptly stopped and detained when she got off the plane. Her Danish passport was confiscated and she was not allowed to communicate with her family or a lawyer for 13 hours. She was interrogated on fabricated charges of “assault and battery against on-duty public employees during their performance of official duty.” She was released on 18 September and left the country.

On 27 December 2014, the GCHR published a letter by **Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja**. He encouraged human rights defenders in the country to continue their work, saying “As human rights defenders you are like sailors and as sailors you are fighting the waves and watching the wind... One does not give up and abandon his ship because the wind is moving against him, what’s important is that you have your compass and you know your destination.”

Iran

Millions of Iranians participated in presidential and local elections in June 2013 and hopes for positive engagement with the international community rose with the election of self-proclaimed moderate Hassan Rouhani to the presidency in 2013. However at the end of 2014, the domestic divide between conservatives and reformists remained deep and the human rights situation dire.

Following President Rouhani's election some political prisoners were released, but many civil society activists remain in prison on political charges. Prisoners, especially those held on politically motivated charges, are subject to abuse by authorities. Iranian women and women's rights activists continue to face discrimination.

2014 saw the arrest of independent journalists **Jason Rezaian** and **Yeganeh Salehi**, a married couple, following a raid by security forces on the night of 22 July 2014. During the raid their personal belongings including laptops and books were confiscated. Salehi, who reports for the UAE-based *The National*, was released without charge on 6 October 2014. Jason Rezaian, who writes for the *Washington Post*, remains in detention. Both journalists were reporting from and about Iran, and had obtained licenses from the Iranian Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance which gives them full-fledged rights to work as journalists within Iran.

On 22 October 2014, more than 1,000 activists took part in protests against acid attacks carried out on women in Iran. Protests which took place in front of the Iranian Parliament in Tehran and the Isfahan Judiciary complex ended in excessive violence being employed by the authorities. Peaceful protestors were dispersed with tear gas, some were beaten and arrested. Photojournalists who were present also suffered physical assaults and had their cameras confiscated.

One day after the protests, **Arya Jafari**, a photojournalist working as a freelancer with links to the Iranian Students' News Agency, was arrested by revolutionary guards at his home. He was released on bail on 3 November. **Mahdieh Golrou**, who is a student, human rights and women's activist as well as a member of the Council for Defense of Educational Rights, was arrested after a raid on her house following her participation in the protests. Several other prominent activists, including human rights defender and lawyer **Nasrin Sotoudeh**, were arrested and released in October after between seven and 48 hours.

Nasrin Sotoudeh, as well as participating in the acid attack protests, has also been campaigning and demanding her right to work as a lawyer, after she was suspended from practicing law for three years on 18 October 2014 as a result of her human rights work. She protests daily in front of the Lawyers' Union headquarters in Tehran with a banner reading "Right to Work, Right to be different."

In 2014, human rights defender and lawyer **Narges Mohammadi** continued to be subjected to judicial harassment. In November she was summoned to Evin Prison and interrogated for six hours. It is thought that her summoning may be related to the death of human rights activist and blogger Sattar Beheshti, who died in a police station after he had been tortured. Narges Mohammadi made a film at his graveside which went viral on social networks. In 2012, Narges Mohammadi was sentenced to six years in prison for charges including membership of human rights organization Defenders of Human Rights Centre (DHRC), propaganda against the State and

assembly and collusion against national security. She was released on bail and has continued to fight for the promotion and protection of human rights.

Student activist and women's rights defender **Bahareh Hedayat** remains in detention, following her arrest on 31 December 2009. She is serving a nine-and-a-half-year sentence for her peaceful human rights work. She was spokesperson for the pro-democratic Iranian student movement, and an active women's rights activist and advocate for the "One Million Signatures Campaign" demanding changes to discriminatory laws against women.

Iraq

2014 saw a deterioration in the human rights situation in Iraq as armed clashes between government and oppositions escalated. In June 2014 the crisis worsened as opposition armed groups including the Islamic State or the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) launched a major offensive and a state of emergency was declared. Serious human rights violations were committed by ISIS as well as by the government. Genocide against the Yazidi and Christians in the Province of Nineveh at the hands of ISIS attracted world attention and intervention. At an international conference in Paris in September leaders and diplomats from more than 30 countries pledge to use whatever means necessary to defeat the global threat of ISIS.

It is against this backdrop of atrocities and serious human rights violations that human rights defenders continue to carry out their peaceful work. Those advocating for the promotion and protection of human rights and those exercising their right to freedom of expression continue to be targeted.

The government-run Communications and Media Commission (CMC) issued new mandatory media guidelines that violate Iraq's obligation to protect freedom of expression. They demand that media avoid making information about insurgent forces public and require them to report on government forces only in favourable terms.

In March 2014, human rights defender and journalist **Mohammed Bedaiwi** was killed by a Captain of the Presidential Regiment at a checkpoint in Baghdad as he was on his way to work. He was director of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberté Radio Free Iraq and University Professor at the Faculty of Information in Baghdad. His killing forms part of a pattern of targeting journalists and is stark evidence of the dangerous background against which journalists, media workers and all those exercising and promoting freedom of expression operate in Iraq.

In May, human rights activists **Ali Hussain Aboud**, was arrested by judicial police in Najaf. He is President of the Al-Rafidan Association for Human Rights in Najaf and most recently has been active in fighting against corruption and promoting women's rights. He was held in incommunicado detention before being released on 22 July 2014 without charge.

On 22 September 2014, lawyer and human rights defender **Samira Saleh Al-Naimi** was executed by a group of masked men belonging to ISIS. She had been kidnapped from her home the previous week after she had described the "barbaric" widespread damage that ISIS had inflicted on the city of Mosul. She worked tirelessly as a lawyer and human rights defender, defending detainees and supporting the disadvantaged families in the city.

The GCHR undertook a mission to Iraqi Kurdistan in September 2014. It met with many civil society organisations and published a report [*Iraqi Kurdistan: No safe haven for human rights defenders and independent journalists*](#), which documents the restricted environment in which civil society and the media operate. Despite the existence of thousands of officially registered human rights organisations, many work in a dangerous environment and are threatened and harassed as a result, particularly women's rights organisations. Journalists have been imprisoned by the Kurdish Regional Government as a result of their work and three have been murdered in the past six years with no proper investigations carried out into their deaths.

Kuwait

Restrictions in place on freedom of expression, the misuse of the judicial system to attack human rights defenders, in particular Bedoon activists, and the failure of the government to resolve the plight of the 'stateless' Bedoon community was highlighted in the GCHR report [*Dignity has no price in Kuwait*](#), published in April 2014 following a mission to Kuwait. The report issued recommendations to the government including calls to revoke articles 25 and 111 of the Penal Code, which restrict the right to freedom of expression; guarantee fair procedures in legal cases; and grant citizenship to the Bedoon, who account for over 100,000 members of the population.

The targeting of the Bedoon community and all those who work on promoting their rights continued throughout 2014. In February, human rights defenders **Nawaf Al-Hendal** and **Hadeel Buqrais** were summoned to appear before the state security authorities for investigation. Both activists were involved in monitoring and documenting human rights violations in Kuwait, for example during Bedoon demonstrations, which are often targeted by state security forces.

On 24 February 2014, human rights defender and Bedoon community activist **Abdulahkim Al-Fadhli** was arrested along with his brother **Abulnasser Al-Fadhli** on charges relating to a demonstration in support of Bedoon rights. They were interrogated without the presence of a lawyer. Abulnasser Al-Fadhli was released on 31 March. Abdulhakim Al-Fadhli was detained in Central Prison and began a hunger strike on 5 April after his detention was extended. He was eventually released on 8 April. The brothers told the court that they were tortured while in detention, however their allegations have been ignored.

Human rights defenders involved in monitoring peaceful protests and human rights violations have been subjected to physical assault and judicial harassment in an attempt to hinder their work. On 3 July 2014, a human rights defender and member of the Kuwaiti Observatory for Human Rights, **Mohammed Sahod Al-Anzi**, was arrested by members of the Special Forces as he monitored a peaceful demonstration. He was beaten and arbitrarily detained in the Criminal Investigation Department before being released the following day.

On 7 July 2014, **Abdulahkim Al-Fadhli** was again arrested and detained as a direct consequence of his legitimate and peaceful human rights work. He was detained for a month before being released pending trial. During this time he was subjected to ill-treatment and physical assault and commenced a hunger strike in protest. In September, he was sentenced to six months in prison after being accused of assaulting a police officer despite medical records confirming that he himself had been beaten by the very same police officer. He was not allowed to call witnesses as part of his defence. His trial was adjourned by the Kuwaiti Misdemeanours Court and his detention extended on two occasions.

Freedom of expression faces on-going restrictions in Kuwait and those exercising and promoting this fundamental right are targeted as a result. On 27 August 2014, a blogger, human rights activist and member the National Committee for Monitoring Violations, **Mohammed Al-Ajmi**, was summoned to the Department of Criminal Investigation. When he arrived he was detained pending investigation before being released on 2 September on bail. He was previously arrested on 6 July 2014, while he was monitoring violations during the march, "Dignity of the nation", and was released on the same day.

In September, the GCHR and Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS), World Alliance for Citizen participation (CIVICUS), Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association (ACPRA), Women's Driving Campaign and National Committee for Monitoring Violations (NCV) organised a side event at the 27th session of the Human Rights Council to launch a new report entitled *OHCHR, the Human Rights Council and the Gulf Countries: An Analysis of actions undertaken since 2011* and to talk about the Women's Driving Campaign in Saudi Arabia and the situation of human rights defenders in Kuwait. **Nawaf Al-Hendal**, an independent human rights defender

from Kuwait, talked about the ongoing attacks on human rights defenders in the country. He specifically mentioned the two cases of Abdulhakim Al-Fadhli and Mohammed Al-Ajmi. He also talked about the community of Bedoon in Kuwait and described how the authorities continue to violate their basic rights. The GCHR highlighted that Kuwait did not receive as much attention from UN mechanisms as is warranted by the grave human rights situation in the country.

On 19 October 2014, human rights defender **Suleiman Bin Jassim** was sentenced to one month in prison following a trial that did not adhere to fair procedures. After a number of adjournments, the case was heard by the Court on 12 October 2014 based on fabricated charges of participating in an unlicensed demonstration and disobeying police orders. In April 2013, as he was peacefully monitoring a demonstration in Kuwait City on behalf of the National Committee for Monitoring Violations (NCV), he was violently assaulted and arrested by two Special Forces police officers. He was detained for three days before being released on 21 April 2013. A complaint he filed against the police was dismissed. At the date of writing he is still free pending an appeal of the October sentence.

Oman

In Oman, freedom of expression continues to be restricted as human rights defenders and media activists are targeted and criminal defamation laws are increasingly used against them in an attempt to hinder their work. The ill-treatment and torture of human rights defenders in detention continues to be a matter of grave concern.

The practice of torture is widespread in Oman state penal institutions and has become the state's knee-jerk reaction to independent political expression. The GCHR published a report, officially launched at a side event to the 25th session of the Human Rights Council in Geneva in March in which it describes its mission to Oman in 2013 and documented the arsenal of torture methods in use including mock execution, beating, hooding, solitary confinement, subjection to extremes of temperature and to constant noise, abuse and humiliation.

Torture is allowed to flourish against a backdrop of widespread arbitrary arrest and detention in secret institutions. Examples include the case of **Basima Al-Rajhi**, a well-known broadcaster in Oman who became involved in campaigns for social change. Another is prominent human rights activist, **Khalfan Al-Badwawi**, who has suffered some of the most consistent abuse over the last two years and has been threatened with serious harm if he does not cease his human rights activities. In addition to being convicted and imprisoned on the charge of "insulting the Sultan", he has been subjected to arbitrary detention and torture and his family harassed and intimidated.

Human rights defender and on-line activist **Noah Al-Saadi** was held in incommunicado detention in July before being released on 7 August 2014 with no official charges brought against him. Well-known human rights defender **Mohammed Al-Fazari**, a blogger, founder and editor of the e-magazine *Citizen*, faced continued harassment throughout 2014. *Citizen* has published a number of articles on corruption in government departments, including the Public Prosecution Office. In December, he was arrested and placed under a travel ban while at the airport in Muscat on his way to the UK. On 30 August, he presented himself following a summons by the General Directorate of Inquiries and Criminal investigations and was detained incommunicado until his release on 4 September.

Long-standing, prominent human rights defender and blogger **Saed Jadad** also faced judicial harassment as a result of exercising his right to freedom of expression. He was released on bail in December following reports of his serious ill-health and ill-treatment in prison. He was arrested on 10 December 2014, International Human Rights Day, during a raid on his house by security forces and was held in incommunicado detention. A travel ban had been in place against him since July 2014 although he was only informed of it in October. **Saed Al-Darodi**, a writer and online activist, was also held in incommunicado detention when he was summoned to appear before the Special Division of the Omani Police in October, reportedly due to online postings he had made.

Qatar

In a joint submission to the UN Universal Periodic Review 19th session of the UPR Working Group, CIVICUS and the GCHR raised concern over the arbitrary restrictions on the right to freedom of expression in Qatar and outlined the environment in which human rights defenders work. In 2014, the Government continued to employ legislative and extra-legal measures to curb civil society activism. The situation was highlighted again in June at a side event at the 26th session of the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, organised jointly with CIHRS, Human Rights Watch, the International Service for Human Rights (ISHR) and CIVICUS. **Joe Stork**, board member of the GCHR, and deputy director of the MENA division for Human Rights Watch spoke about the situation in Qatar. He described how although the constitution of Qatar guarantees freedom of assembly and of association, these rights are severely restricted in practice. An example is the case of poet **Muhammad Ibn Al-Dheeb Al-Ajami** who received a life sentence in 2011, later reduced to 15 years, for incitement to overthrow the regime. His arrest followed the publication of his “Jasmine poem” which criticises governments across the Gulf region in the aftermath of the Arab Spring uprisings.

A new Cyber-Crime Law came into force in September, which further threatens freedom of expression. It is feared that this law, which contains vague provisions, will be used as a tool to target human rights defenders and to hinder their legitimate and peaceful work. For example, a person can be sentenced to three years in prison and a fine of up to QR 500,000 (approx. US\$140,000) if found guilty of “spreading false news with the aim of destabilising national security” or for “using websites to spread terrorism or support terrorist groups.”

At the 27th UN Human rights Council in September, the CIHRS and GCHR made an oral intervention expressing dismay at the refusal of the government of Qatar to accept many of the recommendations put forward during the UPR process, including calling for respect of freedom of expression, freedom of assembly and freedom of association.

Saudi Arabia

The human rights situation in Saudi Arabia was dire in 2014 as human rights defenders remain in detention on fabricated charges, and are increasingly subjected to arrest, trials, lengthy sentences and harassment as a result of their peaceful activities. According to reliable reports received by the GCHR, widespread ill-treatment of human rights defenders at the hands of state authorities is continuing. The rights of women and girls continue to be violated and targeting of women human rights defenders was stepped up, particularly those advocating for women’s right to drive.

The crackdown against online activists in Saudi Arabia was highlighted by the GCHR in July in which attention was called to the threats, harassments, smear campaigns, detention, ill-treatment and judicial harassment faced by these activists. Human rights defenders and online activists reportedly are being detained together with convicted criminals in Beriman, Dhahban, Sha'ar, Al-Tarfiyah, Ulaysha and Al-Hayer prisons where they are subjected to inhumane conditions. Despite the grave situation, the response from the international community and intergovernmental bodies such as the United Nations has been extremely disappointing.

On 15 April, human rights lawyer, and founder and director of Monitor for Human Rights in Saudi Arabia (MHRSA), **Waleed Abu Al-Khair**, was jailed on trumped up charges relating to the peaceful human rights work of MHRSA, including under the Anti-Cyber Crime Law, following an unfair trial. He was sentenced to 15 years in prison and a travel ban of equal duration, and a fine of approximately US\$53,300. Reports indicate that he has been ill treated in prison, subjected to solitary confinement, deprived of necessary medical attention and detained with convicted criminals. His wife Samar Badawi has not been permitted to visit him. The GCHR issued appeals on this case in August, July, June and April. An appeal was issued in February in relation to another case against him, when a three-month sentence was

upheld relating to a petition he, and 64 others, signed about the trial of Jeddah reformists and events in Qatif in December 2011.

In April, blogger and founding member of Al-Adalah Center for Human Rights, **Fadel Al-Manasef**, also received a lengthy sentence of 15 years in prison, a 15-year travel ban to commence on his release, and a fine. In September his sentence was reduced by one year. He has been detained since his arrest in October 2011. The charges against him related to incitement and participation in protests, writing articles against state security and publishing them online, signing an anti-government petition, contacting foreign media outlets without authorisation and taking reporters to protests and giving them harmful information on the Kingdom. The GCHR issued appeals on his case in April, June and September.

Human rights defender **Raif Badawi** was sentenced to 10 years in prison, 1000 lashes, a 10-year travel ban to start on expiration of his jail sentence, a ban on using media outlets and a fine of one million Saudi Riyals (about US\$266,600). He was sentenced on 7 May 2014 after being detained for almost two years. Badawi is co-founder and editor of the website Liberal Saudi Network, an on-line forum created to foster political and social debate in Saudi Arabia. He has been detained since 17 June 2012 in a prison in Jeddah. His sentence stemmed from the creation of the website and his calls for reforms in the Kingdom. The GCHR issued appeals on his case in October, September and May. He received 50 lashes in public on 9 January 2015.

Lawyers **Abdulrahman Al-Subaihi**, **Bander Al-Nogaithan** and **Abdulrahman Al-Rumaih** were sentenced on charges including “prejudicing public order” and “insulting the judiciary” via Twitter. The sentences ranged from five to eight years in prison, travel bans and a ban on using and appearing on social media.

The plight of members of the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association (ACPRA), an organisation set up in 2009, remains a matter of grave concern. The NGO’s goals were to document human rights violations, increase awareness of rights, empower marginalised and vulnerable populations and promote the framework of human rights as a compatible concept with Islamic principles. Authorities shut down ACPRA in March 2013 and the 11 founding members have been continuously targeted and subjected to judicial harassment and fabricated charges. Eight of the ten living founding members are in detention at the time of writing. In April, one of the co-founders **Dr Abdulrahman Al-Hamed** was summoned to appear before the office of Criminal Investigation where he was detained and held in incommunicado detention. It is thought that he is currently held in Buraidah prison.

In February 2014, human rights defender **Abdulaziz Al-Ghamdi**, who had shown his support for ACPRA and provided assistance to family members of detained members, was arrested and detained following a raid at his house during which money, books and computers were confiscated. In March 2014, detained human rights defenders and

co-founders of ACPRA **Dr Abdullah Al-Hamed** and **Dr Mohammed Al-Qahtani** began a hunger strike in protest against their conditions in al Ha'ir prison in Riyadh.

In November, a founding member of ACPRA, **Fawzan Al-Harbi**, was sentenced to ten years in prison followed by a ten-year travel ban in November 2014. The charges brought against him include participating in the establishment of an unlicensed organisation (ACPRA), “inciting disobedience to the ruler by calling for demonstration” and “accusing the judiciary of being incapable of delivering justice.” The GPCR issued an appeal on his case jointly with the Monitor for Human Rights in Saudi Arabia.

Women’s rights defender **Souad Al-Shammari** was arrested and charged in October relating to posts she made on Twitter advocating for women’s rights. Her lawyer was not allowed to be present during her interrogation nor was she allowed to view the interrogation report.

In October, blogger and human rights defender **Mikhlif Al-Shammari** was sentenced to two years in prison and 200 lashes. He has been arrested many times in recent years, including an arrest on 15 July 2010 on a charge of “annoying others”. He was released on bail on 24 February 2012. On 3 July 2014, the Specialised Criminal Court of Appeal in Riyadh upheld a verdict against Al-Shammari of a five-year prison sentence, a ten-year travel ban to commence on completion of his sentence, and a ban on writing articles, accessing the Internet and appearing in the media. The GPCR issued a previous appeal on his case in September when he was summoned to General Intelligence Directorate and informed of the Interior Ministry’s order to shut down his Twitter account in March.

In July, human rights defender and activist for the women’s driving campaign **Alia Fared** was stopped by police and brought to a police station. Her car was seized for a week and she was forced to sign a pledge not to drive again except in case of emergency.

In December 2014, women’s rights activists **Maysaa Al-Amodi** and **Lujian Al-Hathlol** were detained for driving a car and their case is to be heard by the Specialized Criminal Court. They have both been working strongly in defense of women's right to drive in Saudi Arabia and have participated actively in the campaigns, "I have the right to lead" and "my right to my dignity." In the same month, a travel ban was imposed on human rights defender **Samar Badawi**, just days before she was scheduled to fly to Brussels to participate in the 16th European Union NGO forum on Human Rights. In September she had spoken at the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva of the human rights violations taking place in Saudi Arabia and called for the release of her husband **Waleed Abu Al-Khair**.

In a further example of the restriction of freedom of expression, the website of the GCHR was blocked by Saudi authorities in December.

Human rights defenders continue to appear before the Specialised Criminal Court whose jurisdiction is to deal with terrorism-related matters. They include human rights defenders Waleed Abu Al-Khair, Essa Al-Hamed founding member of ACPRA, and Mikhlif Al-Shammari.

Syria

Syria's armed conflict escalated further in 2014 with government attacks intensifying and torture and executions of detainees increasing. 2014 saw Syria become the biggest source of refugees in the world. Human rights defenders in the country continue to carry out their work under constant threat of judicial harassment, arrest and imprisonment.

Others have been detained and remain in detention despite UN Security Council Resolution 2139, adopted on 22 February 2014, which strongly condemned the "arbitrary detention and torture of civilians in Syria (...) as well as kidnappings and abductions and enforced disappearances" and demanded "the immediate cessation of such practices and the release of all persons arbitrarily detained."

On 20 February 2014, the GCHR issued an appeal jointly with five other human rights organisations following a raid on the home of human rights lawyer **Khalil Ma'touq**, the arrest of his daughter Ranim, the beating of his son and the arrest of **Gihan Amin**, a human rights lawyer and member of the Committee for the Defence of Prisoners of Conscience in Syria and of the National Organisation for Human Rights in Syria.

In April 2014, an appeal was issued jointly with the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network (EMHRN) on the case of human rights defender **Abdulahdi Sheikh Awad**, director of the Syrian Democratic Institute, who had also been involved in aid efforts in the context of the conflict. He was arrested in December 2013, close to the Syrian-Lebanese border, by members of the governmental security forces. He has since been denied access to lawyers and to his family and no specific charges have been brought against him to date. Unconfirmed reports suggest that he has been subjected to severe torture by the security forces while in detention.

On 3 May 2014, World Press Freedom Day, the GCHR called for the protection of the rights to freedom of speech and expression, referring inter alia to the case of the Syrian Centre for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM) members. The SCM is a key non-governmental organisation and was instrumental in disseminating information regarding the situation in Syria to sources outside the country. The

GCHR highlighted how, throughout the Gulf region, human rights defenders including journalists and on-line activists suffer intimidation, harassment, arrest, detention and other human rights abuses because they peacefully and legitimately report on human rights violations or simply express their opinion.

On 15 May, the GCHR was one of 104 civil society groups, that urged UN Security Council members to approve a draft resolution supported by a broad coalition of countries to refer the situation in Syria to the prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC), on the basis that the ICC is the forum most capable of effectively investigating and prosecuting the people who bear the greatest responsibility for serious human rights crimes and of offering a measure of justice for victims in Syria. However, on 22 May, China and Russia prevented the Security Council from adopting a draft resolution, which would have referred Syria to the ICC. (UN Press Release, 22 May 2014 <http://www.un.org/press/en/2014/sc11407.doc.htm>)

On 5 September 2014, the GCHR issued a joint statement, together with 78 other human rights organisations, calling for the immediate release of arbitrarily detained human rights defender **Mazen Darwish**, director of the SCM, and his colleagues **Hani Al-Zitano** and **Hussein Ghareer**. The three men were arrested by the Syrian Air Force Intelligence during a raid on their offices on 16 February 2012. They were tried before the Anti-Terrorism Court and accused of "promoting terrorist acts" (pursuant to Article 8 of the Anti-Terrorism Act 2012,) based on charges relating to their peaceful activities monitoring and publishing information about human rights abuses. They have reportedly been subjected to ill-treatment while in detention. The GCHR issued an appeal on 26 March following news of these charges two years after their arrest. This followed another joint statement published on 17 March 2014 calling for their immediate and unconditional release according to the UN Security Council demand on 22 February 2014 that all arbitrarily detained people in Syria should be immediately released.

In May 2013, a UN General Assembly resolution included a demand for the immediate release of the three SCM staff and in January 2014, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention (WGAD) held that the three had been arbitrarily deprived of their liberty due to their human rights activities and called for their immediate release. On 9 June 2014, Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad enacted Legislative Decree no 22 announcing an amnesty for many of the charges peaceful activists faced, including "weakening national sentiment," as well as some offenses under the Anti-Terrorism law that are being used to silence dissent. These included the charges faced by the three men; however, they remain in detention.

On 18 July 2014, the GCHR was one of 12 human rights organisations that jointly called for the immediate and unconditional release of arbitrarily detained activists including the members of the SCM, following the amnesty. Reports from Damascus suggested that the number of those released under the amnesty did not exceed 1,300

individuals and included regular criminals. Furthermore, some people detained for human rights related activities, such as freedom of expression advocate **Bassil Kharatabil**, appear to have been excluded from the amnesty.

On 2 October 2014, a joint call was made by the GCHR together with 25 other organisations, for the release of human rights lawyer **Khalil Ma'touq** and his colleague **Mohamed Zaza**. Ma'touq is the director of the Syrian Centre for Legal Studies and Research and has been peacefully campaigning for human rights for over 20 years. He and his colleague have been missing since 2 October 2012 when it is believed they were arrested at a government security checkpoint. Their families and lawyers have been denied information regarding their whereabouts and authorities continue to deny that they are in custody despite local reports to the contrary, placing them at increased risk of ill-treatment. A previous joint statement had been issued on the case on 5 May 2014, a year and a half after their abduction.

On 9 December 2014, the GCHR welcomed the release of **Jdea Nawfal**, Executive Director of the Syrian Centre for Democracy and Civil Rights. He was arbitrarily arrested and detained on 31 October 2014 at an immigration office close to the Syrian-Lebanese by members of Government Security Forces, when he was returning to Damascus after attending a human rights workshop in Beirut. On 16 December 2014, a second investigation judge in rural Damascus approved his release and this decision was upheld on 17 December 2014 following the rejection of the Public Prosecutor's appeal.

On 9 December 2014, the GHCR was one of 57 organisations to issue a statement on the situation of four prominent human rights activists who were abducted on 9 December 2013 in Douma. The prominent Syrian human rights defenders **Razan Zaitouneh**, her husband **Wa'el Hamada**, **Samira Khalil** and **Nazem Hamadi** remain missing a year after they were abducted by a group of armed men at the offices of the Violations Documentation Centre (VDC), a Syrian human rights monitoring group. A previous statement had been issued on their case on 27 May together with 44 other organisations. Since their arrest there has been no information on their health, status or whereabouts, and no group has claimed responsibility for their abduction or made requests in return for their release. In the joint statement, the GCHR and other organisations urged both government and armed opposition groups to stop arbitrarily arresting, abducting and detaining people for their peaceful, journalistic, and humanitarian activities in accordance with UN Security Council resolution 2139.

United Arab Emirates

The on-going trend by authorities in the UAE to restrict the rights to freedom of opinion and expression in the country was evident throughout 2014. Detained human rights defenders, including a group of prisoners known as the UAE94, were subjected to ill-treatment and their families harassed.

Human rights defenders are at risk of being targeted under the Anti-Terrorism Law which was approved in August 2014. A coalition of NGOs including the GCHR called on the UN Human Rights Council in December to act to ensure that the legislation is not used as a tool against human rights defenders, particularly as human rights groups were among those named as terrorist organisations by the authorities in November 2014. Sentences under the proposed legislation include capital punishment and life imprisonment.

In January, the authorities arbitrarily detained **Aisha Ibrahim Al-Zaabi** as she tried to leave the country with her 18-month-old son. Al-Zaabi is the wife of human rights defender **Mohamed Saqer Al-Zaabi**, who was convicted in absentia in the trial of 94 human rights defenders and activists in July 2013, known as the UAE94.

Human rights defender and on-line activist **Osama Al-Najjar** was sentenced to three years in prison and a fine of approximately US\$136,000. He was violently arrested on 17 March 2014; but his case did not appear before the court until September, when the new anti-terror law was invoked. He was charged with belonging to the group Al-Islah, offending and instigating hatred against the State via Twitter, and spreading lies about the torture of his father, **Hossain Al-Najjar**, one of the UAE94, who is currently serving an 11-year jail term for his human rights activities. He has been subjected to torture and ill-treatment on an on-going basis. The GCHR issued appeals on the case of Osama Al-Najjar in March, April, September, October and November and continues to call for his immediate release.

In May 2014, British barrister **Victoria Meads** was refused entry into the UAE and was informed that she is banned for life from entry. It is feared that this ruling is a direct result of her work as a human rights advocate. She had visited the UAE in October 2012 on behalf of the GCHR, the Arab Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI) and Human Rights Watch, when she sought to evaluate and to seek responses to a highly critical European Union resolution which expressed grave concerns over the treatment, repression and intimidation of human rights defenders, political activists and civil society actors who peacefully exercise their basic rights to freedom of expression, opinion and assembly in the UAE. Her report noted the lack of cooperation by authorities and that the findings of the EU are clearly accurate.

Ill-treatment of detained human rights defenders continues in the UAE. Prominent human rights lawyer and former President of the Association of Jurists, **Mohammed Al-Roken**, was denied contact with his family, subjected to ill-treatment in prison and placed in solitary confinement. He is serving a ten-year sentence which was handed down in July 2013 at the end of the notorious UAE94 trial.

In August, the GCHR wrote an open letter to the President, and Vice- President and Prime Minister of the UAE and Ruler of Dubai, regarding human rights defender **Obaid Al-Zaabi** calling for his immediate release. He remains in incommunicado detention despite the fact that the Federal Supreme Court in Abu Dhabi declared him innocent in May 2014, following his arrest in December 2013. The charges included “setting up a Twitter account” and “dissemination of information that incites hatred.”

Blogger and prominent human rights defender **Ahmed Mansoor** has been continuously targeted by State Security forces. On 28 October 2014, his Twitter account was hacked and it is believed that the hackers may be linked with Emirati state security. Mansoor, a member of the GCHR Advisory Board, was one of the initiators of the 3 March 2011 petition that called for democratic reform of the UAE Parliament. He was subsequently jailed that year in what became widely known as the UAE5 case. While he was pardoned, he remains subject to an arbitrary travel ban, and unable to be present at GCHR meetings in Washington in November 2014.

Yemen

Human rights defenders and media workers were targeted throughout 2014 as a result of the exercise of their right to freedom of expression. In one week alone in February 2014 nine journalists were subjected to gross human rights violations including threats, attempted kidnappings, physical and verbal assaults, defamation and arbitrary arrests by unidentified armed men and members of the security agency.

In March 2014, human rights defender **Ali Al-Dailami** was detained for 12 hours at Sana’a airport and prevented from travelling to Jordan where he was due to attend a human rights meeting on gender in situations of conflict and emergency. He is head of the Yemen Organization for Defending Rights and Democratic Freedoms, an NGO that monitors human rights violations. In August, his vehicle was fired upon in front of his home.

September saw a series of attacks on media stations and journalists. Homes of presenter **Mohamed Al Jama’i** and journalist **Ibrahim Al Haidam**, who work with privately-owned Yemen Shabab TV, were hit with shells. Raids were carried out on the homes of Al-Shoumoua’ Media Foundation director **Saif Mohamed Ahmed Al-Hadari**, and journalists **Moubarak Al-Alchoual** and **Youssef Al-Qadi**. **Mohamed Imad**, a photographer who has been well known since his coverage of the 2011

revolution, was arrested as he walked down a street in Sanaa and detained for a few hours. He was searched and questioned and his mobile phone was confiscated. Many journalists have reportedly been forced to go into hiding and to censor their work due to concerns for their safety and fear of reprisals for their work.

3. CONCLUSION

In 2014, human rights defenders working for the promotion and protection of human rights in the Gulf region and neighbouring countries continued to do so against a bleak and threatening background. Human rights defenders were targeted including by intimidation, threats, harassment, such as judicial harassment, detention, lengthy sentences and torture. Despite this, they tirelessly continue their work refusing to be silenced.

Political instability in the region in 2014 and government changes brought about since the Arab Spring have not improved the situation for civilians, human rights defenders or their families, as both state and non-state actors continue to commit grave human rights violations. In 2014, governments in Oman and Syria, issued amnesties for activists, however they were not fully implemented

The right to freedom of expression is being increasingly targeted as 2014 saw the killing of journalists, and the arrest and detention of on-line activists and bloggers. Anti-Cyber Crime legislation already on the books in Saudi Arabia and introduced in 2014 in Qatar has the potential to be increasingly used as a tool to target and imprison human rights defenders. 2014 also saw the introduction of Anti-Terrorism legislation enacted in the UAE which has been used against human rights defenders, as have similar laws in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, among others. It is indeed a critical situation when legislative measures are being employed to breach human rights and to silence its advocates.

Many human rights defenders remain in detention where they are subjected to torture and inhumane conditions, despite calls for their release by the United Nations, among others. At the close of 2014, many of the UAE⁹⁴, members of the Syrian Centre for Media (SCM) and the Douma Four in Syria, **Walid Abu-Khair** and **Raif Badawi**, as well as members of ACPRA in Saudi Arabia, and high-profile human rights defenders in Bahrain including GCHR founder **Abdulahdi-Al-Khawaja**, Dr. **Abduljalil Al-Singace** and **Naji Fateel**, remained among the human rights defenders detained at length as a result of their work.

The situation of human rights defenders in the Gulf region is critical; however, this was not reflected by the action of the international community in 2014 which was wanting. In his speech on Human Rights Day 2014, the new UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, reminded the international community:

“All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights”: in perhaps the most resonant and beautiful words of any international agreement, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights promises, to all, the economic, social, political, cultural and civil rights that underpin a life free from want and fear. These human rights are not country-specific. They are not a reward for good behaviour, or particular to a certain era or social group. They are the inalienable entitlements of all people, at all times and everywhere...”

It is imperative that 2015 sees a concerted effort by all those who advocate for human rights to ensure that human rights defenders in the Gulf region can carry out their legitimate and peaceful work in promoting and protecting these universal inalienable entitlements in a safe and supportive environment. The GCHR is committed to continue its work to investigate, inform and protest about breaches of human rights wherever they occur in the region.