



**Gulf Centre for Human Rights sixth annual report:
Mapping human rights violations across 12 countries and
reporting on 100 human rights defenders**



GULF CENTRE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

2017 ANNUAL REPORT

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This report is dedicated to all the detained human rights defenders across the region including GCHR's Founding Directors **Abdulahdi Al-Khawaja** and **Nabeel Rajab**, both jailed in Bahrain, and GCHR Advisory Board member **Ahmed Mansoor**, being held incommunicado in the UAE.

The Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR) is an independent, non-profit and non-governmental organisation that provides support and protection to human rights defenders in the Gulf region and neighbouring countries in order to promote human rights, including but not limited to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly. GCHR is based in Lebanon and documents the environment for human rights defenders in the Gulf region and neighbouring countries, specifically Bahrain, Kuwait, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen.

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I. Executive Summary

The Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR) works to create a safer environment and offer support to human rights defenders. In 2017, GCHR increased its advocacy and support to men and women human rights defenders – including independent lawyers, academics, journalists and online activists – from the Gulf region and neighbouring countries, with an emphasis on building their capacity to carry out their own documentation and advocacy, while building a communal space for activism.

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

In 2017, GCHR issued 127 appeals, statements and updates on the cases of over 100 human rights defenders in 2017. In 2017, GCHR published seven evidence-based reports including its annual report.

GCHR provides direct support to human rights defenders in the region, facilitating emergency requests for assistance (medical support, training, security, trial observation, evacuation etc.) GCHR also assisted in the provision of grants to 15 human rights defenders.

As violations mount, GCHR has increased its coverage and support to women human rights defenders in the MENA region, through international partnerships and networking, including through training workshops. We have a vision of connecting social movements, fighting sectarianism/division and creating space to find common ground.

Through an evaluation carried out in late 2016 and early 2017, GCHR received important feedback from human rights defenders and partner organisations to help shape its new strategic plan for 2017 to 2020. We also received a lot of positive comments about our work, particularly the advocacy work.

GCHR's biggest impact is "visibility that there is a human rights issue in the Gulf. GCHR has had success in providing a framework for human rights in the region vs. it being merely a framework of individuals working in human rights. There is now growing awareness of the importance of working in a group as defenders. GCHR is helping sketch out the boundaries for the human rights movement in the GCC," said a GCHR partner

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

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

"I learned things from women human rights defenders here that I did not hear in other regions, for example that they receive threats from their own families and their friends ask them why they are risking their safety by criticising the authorities," commented **Michel Forst**, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of Human Rights Defenders, at GCHR's 4th Gulf and Neighbouring Countries Platform.

II. Introduction

This is the sixth Annual Report of GCHR, an independent non-governmental organisation founded by human rights defenders from the Gulf Region in 2011. GCHR documents the environment in which human rights defenders (HRDs) work in the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member states (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates), as well as neighbouring countries, namely: Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen. Towards the end of this report is a brief record of the clampdown on civil society and the deterioration of human rights in the GCC and Egypt since 2011.

In 2017, GCHR, the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI) and Maharat Foundation in cooperation with IFEX launched a campaign titled "*Supporting Human Rights Defenders and Freedom of Expression*." The campaign aimed at publicising the profiles of prominent defenders from the region every month. Each defender is celebrated for their efforts to advocate and protect human rights in their respective countries. Nonetheless, the campaign also highlights the challenges defenders are facing, such as detentions, arrests, lengthy prison sentences and other violations endured on their part in order to resist coercive government tactics. The defenders celebrated for their resilience and activism throughout 2017 are: Tunisian journalist **Naziha Rjiba**, the three Omani journalists from *Azamn* newspaper **Ibrahim Al-Maamari**, **Yousef Al-Haj**, and **Zaher Al-Abri**, Egyptian human rights lawyer **Gamal Eid**, Iraqi women's rights activist **Hanna Edwar**, **Ahmed Mansoor** from United Arab Emirates, **Mudawi Ibrahim Adam** from Sudan, Bedoon rights activist **Abdulahkim Al-Fadhli** from Kuwait, the Moroccan journalist **Ali Anouzla**, WHRD **Radhya Al-Mutawakel** from Yemen, **Wadad Halawani** from Lebanon, and **Jamil Dakwar** from Palestine.

The general trends and events in 2017 are increased repression and closure of civic space. Increased surveillance, judicial harassment in the form of summoning for interrogation or unannounced travel bans, detention and enforced disappearances continue to be the hallmarks of government efforts to restrict human rights activism. In conflict-devastated regions and countries, journalists were the most at risk. In Iraq and Syria, journalists have not been equipped with the necessary training or safety measures and hence not only endured the government's grip on freedom of the press and expression but as well were directly at risk in covering the conflict.

HRDs, activists, and journalists have faced different forms of coercion, repression and harassment. All of these have violated their immediate human rights to freedom of expression, opinion and assembly, as well as implicating the repressive measures taken by their respective governments infringing upon their freedom of movement in the form of travel bans, right to a fair trial in light of arbitrary detentions, and ill-treatment and torture in detention. Six HRDs have gone on hunger strikes to protest the conditions of their detention, trials, sentences and prison conditions. **Khalid Al-Omari** in Saudi Arabia, **Atena Daemi** and **Ehsan Mazandarani** in Iran, Dr. **Nasser Bin Ghaith** in the UAE, and **Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja** in Bahrain, who only suspended his hunger strike as the UN's Universal Periodic Review included recommendations to investigate the violations of Bahraini authorities against prisoners, especially jailed HRDs, and against HRDs in general.

A. Brief Outline of Activities and Achievements

Through its activities GCHR aims to provide human rights defenders with the support and advocacy they require to promote and protect human rights without fear for their safety. To this end, GCHR undertakes advocacy work at an international, regional and national level. Throughout 2017, in addition to seven reports, GCHR issued 127 appeals, coordinated or signed over a dozen joint appeals and letters, 45 updates and 92 news alerts on cases of human rights defenders in the Gulf region and neighbouring countries. GCHR was able to support human rights defenders (HRDs) by securing emergency support and grants to assist defenders from Bahrain, Oman, Syria and Yemen. GCHR works closely with partner organisations to carry out human rights activities and to ensure that it offers the best support to human rights defenders. In 2017, GCHR strengthened its partnerships with CIVICUS, FIDH, IFEX, Global Voices, Maharat Foundation, ANHRI, and the WHRDs International Coalition, in addition to many local partners in the countries in which it works (some of whom are named below).

Monitoring and Publicising Cases of Human Rights Defenders at Risk:

On a daily basis, GCHR monitors cases of violations against human rights defenders, including lawyers, journalists, bloggers and online activists, who report on human rights violations, in the region and publicises them widely. Since 2011, the GCHR research team has taken up more than 600 cases of human rights defenders and journalists at risk from Syria, Bahrain, Iraq, Iran, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar, UAE, and Yemen. Over 1690 appeals have been issued. These cases have been widely delivered as appeals or urgent actions to a distribution list of over 2640 contacts in the targeted countries and abroad. This includes the national, regional, and international mechanisms including the UN system. Cases are publicised on our website as well as on Facebook and Twitter. GCHR's web reach is growing, with 231,683 page views by 24,226 visitors in 2017, and over 11,000 followers on social media. The aim is to create public support for those human rights defenders who are at risk and an awareness of their plights.

Throughout 2017, GCHR stressed that respective governments must ensure the immediate and unconditional release of all activists, bloggers, journalists and HRDs who were detained and arrested solely on the basis of their activism or the exercise of their rights. Particularly in the cases of GCHR Board Members, Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja, Nabeel Rajab and Ahmed Mansoor. Moreover, GCHR expressed concern over the case of **Osama Al-Najjar** from the United Arab Emirates who is arbitrarily detained even though he completed his sentence in 2017.

United Nations Advocacy:

During the 34th session of United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC), GCHR hosted two side-events. The first event launched GCHR's annual report: "See their Struggle, Realise their rights: Human Rights Defenders including journalists at Imminent Risk in the Gulf Region and Neighbouring Countries". The event was held in co-operation with CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation, the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT), International Service for Human Rights (ISHR) and the Omani Centre for Human Rights (OCHR).

The second event was entitled: "Torture, Physical Coercion and Reprisals in Bahrain" on 22 March. The event was held in co-operation with FIDH, CIVICUS, OMCT, Bahrain Center for Human Rights (BCHR) and the Bahrain Nursing Society (BNS).

In light of the conclusions and recommendations of this side event, on 20 April, **Maryam Al-Khawaja**, the Special Advisor on Advocacy for GCHR, delivered a statement to the UN Committee Against Torture (CAT) on GCHR's CAT submission which details torture, physical coercion and reprisal against journalists, activists and human rights defenders in Bahrain. The submission notes the failure of Bahrain to follow its own King's independent commission's recommendations, which "provided a path to rectify past conduct and to establish rules and institutions that would ostensibly prevent recurrence of misbehaviour on the part of Bahraini police and internal security officials." The report aims to inform international observers and motivate the Bahraini government to undertake substantive, constructive and permanent corrective action.

On 13 June, 15 organisations, including GCHR, signed a joint letter sent to UN Member and Observer States to protest the arbitrary arrest and detention of Nabeel Rajab after a year from his arrest. The signatories particularly urged member states to levy international pressure for Rajab's release whose detention is unlawful.

During GCHR's participation in the 35th session of the UNHRC which took place in June, it held two side-events.

The first panel discussion focused on the ongoing attacks on public freedoms in Yemen during wartime. The participants called for an international investigation into the crimes committed by all sides in the conflict in Yemen. The side event was organised by Mwatana Organization for Human Rights, GCHR, the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS), Human Rights Watch, Index for Censorship, PEN International, OMCT and FIDH under the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, CIVICUS, the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, the Women Human Rights Defenders International Coalition (WHRD-IC), and the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ).

The second panel discussion which examined the criminalisation of peaceful expression in Bahrain. "Freedom of expression and assembly in Bahrain are currently under attack," said the panelists. The side event was co-organised by GCHR, CIVICUS, BCHR, Americans for Democracy and Human Rights (ADHRB), CIHRS, Index for Censorship, PEN International, WHRD-IC, FIDH, and CPJ. The panel featured **Sherif Mansour**, MENA Program Coordinator at CPJ, **Julie Gromellon**, BCHR Senior Advocacy Officer, and Prof. **Damian McCormack**, an orthopedic specialist and activist from Ireland. The panel was moderated by **Khalid Ibrahim**, Executive Director of GCHR, and concluded by calling on the UN and the international community to increase efforts to end all forms of reprisals against HRDs and other activists in Bahrain, including travel bans, to which they have been subjected in violation of their rights to freedom of assembly and freedom of expression.

In September, GCHR had advocacy efforts on two issues during the UNHRC's 36th session. The first issue was on: “Accountability, ending impunity, and protection of human rights defenders in Yemen”. Speakers who joined GCHR in its advocacy efforts were Radhia Al-Mutawakel, Chairperson of Mwatana for Human Rights, Dr. **Annalisa Ciampi**, UN Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, Michel Forst, UN Special rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, and **Safa Al-Ahmad**, Award-winning Saudi journalist and filmmaker. The second issue was: **“Defending the Civil & Human Rights of the Bedoon Community in Kuwait: The ongoing targeting of Bedoon activists”**. Speakers on this side-event were Dr. **Ebtehal Al-Khateeb**, Writer and Academic from Kuwait, **Drewery Dyke** of Amnesty International, **Melanie Gingell**, Human rights lawyer and member of GCHR’s Board, and Khalid Ibrahim. **Sonia Tancic**, from FIDH’s Geneva office, who moderated the session, said the aim was to highlight the chronic problems facing the Bedoon community in Kuwait and in particular Bedoon HRDs and online activists, and the ways in which the international mechanisms including the UN system could support them.

In May, GCHR presented a special report developed in collaboration with the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI) and Maharat Foundation on “Freedom of Opinion and Expression in Arab Countries 2016” the UNESCO Regional Office in Beirut. Through this report, GCHR, ANHRI and Maharat Foundation aimed to raise awareness about human rights challenges in the Arab region and the conditions of freedom of opinion and expression, which are severely affected in times of political change and wars.

To reiterate its commitment to hold perpetrators of human rights abuses and violations in Yemen accountable, GCHR and 56 organisations submitted a joint letter on the need to establish independent international inquiry on human rights violations to the Permanent Representatives of Member and Observer States of the United Nations Human Rights Council on 29 August.

GCHR joined 390 organisations on an open letter sent to Permanent Representatives to the United Nations on 16 October for Recommendations on the Security Council Open Debate on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda. Recommendations were particularly attentive to funding and demonstrating political commitment to issues and challenges pressed by forced displacement, LGBTQI community, sexual exploitation and gender-based violence.

On 21 December 2017, GCHR participated in a merged session at the Internet Governance Forum calling for the need to adopt progressive policies and initiatives to encourage local content creators to develop content that addresses the needs of communities and the release of online activists who are imprisoned due to content that they published on social media networks such as Facebook and Twitter, in addition to the need to create a knowledge-based society that respects human rights.

Special Reports:

GCHR released seven special reports in 2017, including its fifth annual report. The first report was a joint submission on 31 January with the International Service for Human Rights (ISHR) for the 66th session of the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women. The report covers the crackdown on freedoms of expression and association, the violation of human rights for a fair trial and the arbitrary arrests endured by WHRDs in Kuwait. The second report was released in February.

A joint submission in February by CIVICUS, the Bahrain Center for Human Rights and GCHR for the UN's Universal Periodic Review 27th Session of the UPR Working Group examines the Bahraini government's compliance with its international human rights obligations to create and maintain a safe and enabling environment for civil society. Specifically, the report inspects Bahrain's fulfilment of the rights to freedom of association, assembly, and expression and unwarranted restrictions on HRDs since its previous UPR examination in May 2012. To this end, the report assessed Bahrain's failure to implement most of the recommendations received during the 2nd UPR cycle relating to these issues and provide a number of specific, action-oriented follow-up recommendations to the Government of Bahrain.

The annual report, "See their Struggle, Realise their Rights - Human Rights Defenders at Imminent Risk in the Gulf Region and Neighbouring Countries", reviewed the situation in 2016. On 20 March, GCHR released a report on torture, physical coercion and reprisals in Bahrain as it has been six years since Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry has been created. The main objective of this report was to inform international observers and motivate the Bahraini government to undertake substantive, constructive and permanent corrective action, rather than merely symbolic gestures of compliance with international human rights law.

The fourth special report was released in May in collaboration with ANHRI and Maharat Foundation. The report entitled: "Freedom of Opinion and Expression in Arab Countries 2016" was presented at the UNESCO Regional Office in Beirut.

An alternative report was release by GCHR on 28 July to the Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD) on the discrimination against Bedoon community in Kuwait. The report present recommendations to the authorities in Kuwait to resolve the conditions of statelessness in Kuwait and commit to abolishing discrimination against the Bedoon by designing and implementing appropriate legislation and enforcement mechanism in light of CERD.

Two reports were issued on the human rights situation in Yemen. The first report was released in June, developed in collaboration with Mwatana Organisation for Human Rights and GCHR. The report documents the violations against journalists and respective the legal framework in Yemen for journalists' protection. Yemeni journalists are isolated and desperately need the support of the international community. After more than two years of conflict causing approximately 8,000 deaths, 42,000 injuries in addition to a humanitarian disaster, the press in Yemen remains committed against all the odds to reporting the truth. The second report, released in September, surveys the human rights violations in Yemen to highlight the incapacity, inefficiency and incompetence of the National Commission established in 2016 to carry out its duties that are currently borne by local activists and organisations, along with international NGOs, has led to impunity for human rights violations. Hence, justify the call for an international investigation inquiry.

Emergency Support and Grants:

15 human rights defenders (and in some cases their families) as well as a partner NGO received emergency grants facilitated by GCHR from various partners and sources to help them with their legal costs, evacuation, health treatment, and relocation to safe countries. Human rights defenders from Bahrain, Oman, Syria and Yemen received support from the grants, which were provided by the Euro-Mediterranean Foundation of Support to Human Rights Defenders (EMHRF), Fondation Internationale pour les Défenseurs des Droits de L'Homme (FIDDH), International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), Front Line Defenders, Freedom House and the United Nations.

Capacity Building and Partnerships:

GCHR helped promote the release of the Arabic version of DatNav, the guide to browse digital data for human rights research on 29 March. The Arabic version was published with the support and effort of Meedan Foundation. Datnav is the collaborative product of Amnesty International, Benetech and The Engine Room with nearly 70 people - representing about 40 different institutions around the world - who are active members of the technical community and Human Rights documentation. The "Datnav" guide with the help of Collaborations for Change was developed through a writing sprint in May 2016 in which GCHR took part. The Arabic version of DatNav has been translated by Meedan, an institution that develops digital tools for global translation and journalism. As a permanent supporter of the Meedan Foundation and its work, we are pleased to welcome them to the institutions and individuals who worked to produce this guide. Knowledge on the Arab region has been curated by organisations including GCHR and the Syrian Justice and Accountability Center. By providing an Arabic version of DatNav, GCHR hopes that more researchers in the field of human rights will be able to use the resources in this manual to activate the power of digital data in their work.

In August, GCHR organised a meeting with 35 human rights defenders and representatives of NGO partners to work more collaboratively to challenge shrinking civic space in the MENA region. The meeting committed to collectively identifying opportunities to proactively address chronic restrictions on civil society in the MENA region, and to developing a common plan of action to advance civic space across the region. Participants at the Civic Space gathering issued a public call urging greater solidarity and strategic coordination to address the unabated assault of fundamental freedoms in MENA.

GCHR continues to provide information on a monthly basis from its 10 countries for the CIVICUS Monitor, the first-ever online tool to track and compare civic freedoms on a global scale, which was launched in 2016.

In October, GCHR organised a five-day training workshop for 14 young journalists aimed at building their capacity to support their activism efforts to serve their respective communities. The training was on digital security for human rights, stressing the benefits and uses of digital security in protecting, empowering and supporting young journalists.

A. Country Summaries

Bahrain

GCHR covers many cases from Bahrain, where violations against HRDs have increased during a massive crackdown on civil society, which has suffered from house arrests, arbitrary detention, torture in detention, attacks on peaceful demonstrations leading to the death of five protesters, and the implementation of the death penalty against three torture survivors in 2017. GCHR has put more focus on its two detained Founding Directors Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja and Nabeel Rajab. For example, when Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja was on hunger strike for 24 days in the spring, GCHR updated the website periodically and was among 10 NGOs, including Amnesty, Human Rights Watch and Human Rights First to issue a joint appeal about Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja, Dr. **Abduljalil Al-Singace** and other imprisoned members of the Bahrain 13 – some of whom are serving life sentences.

Kuwait

GCHR submitted a report on Kuwait to the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) on 28 July 2017 in cooperation with the International Movement Against All Forms of Discrimination and Racism (IMADR), which focuses on the Bidoon (stateless people.)

As an example of GCHR's documentation of cases that are not reported by other NGOs, in 2017 human rights defender Abdulhakim Al-Fadhli completed a one-year sentence related to peaceful protests but was not freed until several months later in August 2017, thanks, in great part, to GCHR's advocacy. Al-Fadhli credits GCHR for helping free him and for being able to stay in Kuwait after a deportation order was rescinded.

Oman

Freedom of expression and opinion were heavily penalised in Oman throughout 2017. Journalists and editors of *Azamn* newspaper were arrested in 2016 and suffered politicised trials in 2016 and 2017 lacking due process. Though the Court of Appeal overturned the closure of *Azamn* newspaper, the Ministry of Information and the Security Apparatus ordered the closure of the newspaper. The High Court's final ruling was led by the judge who was named in a corruption-revealing article on *Azamn* newspaper.

Qatar

Violations of migrant workers' rights continue. The main violations reported and covered by GCHR are those on travel bans and deportation of activists. A travel ban has been imposed on the human rights lawyer Dr. **Najeeb Al-Nuaimi**. Authorities deported Saudi human rights defender **Mohammed Al-Otaibi** from Qatar to Saudi Arabia while he was departing to seek asylum in Norway.

Saudi Arabia

There was a serious crackdown on activists and bloggers, including incarcerating and summoning activists who call for reforms and rights that are key to reform. Although the government expresses its will to undergo reform, it is not deeply committed to this as it prosecutes HRDs, citizens, academics and activists who voice their calls for reforms. Particularly, members of the dismantled Civil and Political Rights Association in Saudi Arabia (ACPRA) remain widely targeted. WHRDs are arbitrarily detained and tried for their activism which includes women's rights to drive and take part in public life without a guardian.

United Arab Emirates

GCHR's Board Member Ahmed Mansoor has been in prison since March 2017 with little or no access to his family or lawyer, and he has not yet been brought to trial. GCHR worked closely with Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International on a joint action for Ahmed Mansoor in April and May. We also solicited 88 signatures for a broader appeal. Dr. Nasser Bin Ghaith remains a priority campaign, and GCHR reacted with an urgent appeal to his 10-year sentence in March. His case was transferred to a Federal Appeals Court so he still has the right to appeal, but he remains in prison, where he's been kept in solitary confinement since his arrest in August 2015. GCHR coordinated with 10 other groups to issue a joint appeal prior to Dr. Bin Ghaith's verdict.

Neighbouring Countries:

Iran

Defenders and journalists remain to be targeted by Iranian authorities. Political prisoners are arbitrarily captured and detained at the Evin prison notorious for its gross record of torture and ill-treatment of prisoners. HRD Atena Daemi started a hunger strike to protest her ill-treatment which only ended due to risking her health severely.

Iraq

Afrah Shawki was released in 2017 after her enforced disappearance in 2016. Journalists and freedom of press remain the most affected in Iraq in light of on-going conflict and violence, particularly in Iraqi Kurdistan. NRT offices have been raided and closed without a judicial order and journalists are not equipped with adequate safety training and are killed on duty. The Iraqi Parliament has not yet voted on the problematic freedom of expression and peaceful demonstration bill. This was met with resentment, criticism and protest by different actors: civil society organisations, trade unions and citizens.

Jordan

The government has tightened its grip on the activism of civil society organisations, particularly rights groups. A serious clampdown took place on freedom of expression, opinion and press using existing restrictive laws, especially the Cybercrime Law and the Press and Publication Law and judicial mechanisms. Criminalisation of civil society and human rights activism was further aggravated by government rhetoric reinforced through pro-government newspapers.

Lebanon

Cybercrime and penal laws were used to arrest citizens and activists for the exercise of their online right and freedom of expression. Violence by the police and military has been employed in order to break up protests. In spite of repeated calls on the respective authorities to lead investigations, institute a professional protest management demeanor by security forces and hold perpetrators of previous violations accountable, violence and violation of right to assembly remained the norm during demonstrations.

Syria

2017 marked the death of three prominent HRDs from Syria. Two years after his death, Syrian authorities affirmed that **Bassel Khartabil** has been executed in 2015 upon his transfer to Adra prison and GCHR called on the authorities to release the details pertaining to his prosecution. **Dr. Orouba Barakat** and her daughter **Halla Barakat** were murdered in Turkey. The **Douma Four** activists: **Razan Zaitouneh**, **Wael Hamada**, **Samira Khalil** and **Nazem Hamadi**, along with **Khalil Ma'touq** and **Mohamed Thatha** - all victims of enforced disappearance - remain captive. Journalists are facing judicial harassment and the freedom of press and expression remain threatened and perpetually at risk as the violence escalates.

Yemen

In July, GCHR and CIVICUS hosted a roundtable discussion in New York for NGOs, including its Yemeni partner Mwatana, to discuss potential avenues for cooperation on Yemen, following which an advocacy coalition was formed to call for an independent, international investigation into the violations in the country. GCHR worked with Human Rights Watch and Crisis Action on a joint NGO call for an investigation, as part of the campaign to #EndImpunityNow in Yemen and focused on Yemen at the UNHRC 36. This was part of GCHR's advocacy efforts to support local partners like Mwatana.

GCHR published a report on Yemen about the need for an international inquiry which was distributed to the UN missions. In October, the UN finally adopted an international mechanism to investigate violations carried out by all parties to the war in Yemen. Through its partnership on the CIVICUS Monitor, GCHR's Chair published an Op-Ed with CIVICUS in the *Jerusalem Post*: UN probe into human-rights abuses in Yemen offers glimmer of hope.

III. Country Reports

BAHRAIN

At the onset of 2017, GCHR raised concerns about the increased restrictions, violations and intimidation by the government against journalists and HRDs, and appealed to the Bahraini authorities to promote and respect freedom of press. This was specifically augmented by the trial of **Nazeera Saeed**, WHRD and award-winning journalist, which started on 16 January. Saeed is the Bahrain correspondent for *France 24* and *Radio Monte Carlo Doualiya*. On 17 July 2016, she was summoned for interrogation and was charged for “unlawfully working for the international media” under Article 88 of Law 47/2002. This article prevents all Bahraini journalists, working for foreign news agencies, from freely conducting their work without first acquiring a license from the Ministry of the Information Affairs, which must be renewed annually. Saeed had applied for renewal of her license but her application was rejected without any basis. Furthermore, a travel ban was arbitrarily placed on her in June 2016. On 25 May, Saeed was convicted of working without a permit and fined 1000 BHD (USD\$2650). On 18 July 2017, the Bahraini appeal court upheld the verdict. The Ministry of Information Affairs has also denied license renewals to other Bahrain-based reporters. These include *Agence France-Presse* photojournalist **Mohammed Al-Shaikh**, *Associated Press* photojournalist **Hasan Jamali**, *Associated Press* correspondent, **Reem Khalifa** and *Reuters* cameraman **Aamer Mohammed**. There are extensive restrictions in place on foreign media in Bahrain and over 100 journalists have been denied entry to the country since 2011.

On 30 October 2017, human rights defender and *Al-Wasat* journalist **Mahmoud Abdul-Ridha Al-Jazeera** was sentenced to 15 years' imprisonment and his nationality was ordered to be revoked. On 28 December 2015, Al-Jazeera was subjected to enforced disappearance during a raid on his home by security forces in plain clothes. His arrest came one day after he wrote an article reporting on the regular consultative (Shura) council's session, during which an MP asked authorities to punish Bahrainis who had their citizenship revoked on political grounds by depriving them of government housing. He was charged with supporting terrorism, inciting hatred of the regime, having contacts with a foreign country, and seeking to overthrow the regime by joining *Al-Wafa* and the February 14 Youth Movement. He has been subjected to ill-treatment in detention including being blindfolded and not being allowed to sit or sleep for almost three days. His sentence is being appealed.

On 10 March, pediatric orthopedic surgeon Dr. **Ali Al-Ekri** was released from prison, six years after he was arrested on 17 March 2011 at the Salmaniya Medical Complex in Bahrain. He was among dozens of medics arrested for treating injured protesters following the peaceful demonstrations calling for reform that began in February 2011. He gave interviews to international media about the injuries of protesters, making himself a target. Following a confession induced by torture, a military court sentenced him in September 2011 to 15 years in jail for allegedly possessing weapons, and his sentence was later reduced on appeal to five years.

The government not only targeted HRDs but also extended its repression to their families as a reprisal. Since 02 March, authorities have detained **Sayed Ahmed Al-Wadaei's** brother-in-law and mother-in-law. Al-Wadaei, Director of Advocacy at the Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy (BIRD), is exiled in the United Kingdom after fleeing torture in Bahrain, and had his citizenship revoked in February 2015 by the Bahraini authorities as punishment for his ongoing human rights activism. On 30 October 2017, Al-Wadaei's mother-in-law **Hajer Mansoor**, brother-in-law **Sayed Nizar Alwadaei** and maternal cousin **Mahmood Marzooq** were sentenced to three years in prison on fabricated charges of planting a "fake bomb" in January 2017. Mansoor was sentenced *in absentia*. Marzooq received an additional sentence of a month and a half and was fined 100 BHD for having a dagger.

Despite a court's decision on 30 December 2016 to temporarily release Bahrain's most prominent human rights defender Nabeel Rajab in the Twitter case (tweets about Jaw prison and Yemen), he was immediately taken into custody on another investigation in relation to televised interviews dating back to 2015 and January 2016. ANHRI, Front Line Defenders, GCHR and the Observatory (FIDH-OMCT) called on Bahraini authorities to immediately and unconditionally release Rajab.

Rajab appeared in court on 21 and 22 February 2017 for hearings on charges of "offending a foreign country" (tweeting about the Saudi-led coalition airstrikes in Yemen) and "offending national institutions," for comments about the alleged torture of inmates in Bahrain's Jaw Prison in March 2015. Rajab was tried for two cases related to tweets and media interviews about human rights violations in Bahrain, for which he faces 15 years in prison. He faces additional years in prison on other cases.

Following a brief hearing on 21 February, the trial for the tweets was held over a day to hear video testimony as evidence that Rajab operates his own twitter account – the central fact in the case. He also appeared in court briefly on 23 January 2017 in this case, for which he's facing 15 years in prison.

On 22 March 2017, Manama's Fifth High Criminal Court postponed again Bahraini human rights defender Nabeel Rajab's trial in the Twitter case, in clear contempt of international human rights standards. His arbitrary detention and judicial harassment are only meant to silence one of Bahrain's most vocal human rights defenders, say the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI), Front Line Defenders, GCHR and the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders (FIDH-OMCT).

The verdict made on 10 July 2017 was a two-year prison sentence for Rajab after being found guilty of spreading "fake news" for TV interviews. The charges and verdict do not vindicate the reality of Rajab's tweets as he only reported the human rights violations, which continue to mount in the Gulf Kingdoms.

In late October and early November, GCHR received reports that Rajab was mistreated as he was transferred from the hospital to Jaw prison for his two-year sentence. On 22 November 2017, a Bahraini Appeals Court upheld the two-year prison sentence against Rajab for talking with various media outlets about human rights issues. On this sentence alone, he will remain in jail until December 2018, even though he has now been in jail already since June 2016.

Abdulahdi Al-Khawaja, the Founding Director of GCHR and BCHR and former President of BCHR, commenced his fifth hunger strike since his arrest in 2011, on 12 April. The strike was for demanding respect of his human and civil rights by the prison administration, also, protesting his life sentence and the grave arbitrary sentences of other activists. Al-Khawaja announced on the 21st day of his strike, that his decision to suspend or continue the strike depended on what was adopted at the UN's Universal Periodic Review on Bahrain on 5 May. Al-Khawaja suspended his hunger strike on its 24th day following strong recommendations during Bahrain's UPR. GCHR reiterated its calls to allow him unfettered access to medical care and free him immediately.

On 5 May, Al-Khawaja asserted that: "Due to the mentioning of the issues for which I began the hunger strike (the continuation of arbitrary arrests and the conditions in Jaw prison) in the Universal Periodic Review of Bahrain in Geneva, I have decided to suspend the hunger strike pending the implementation of the recommendations. I would also like to thank the Danish Foreign Ministry, the Danish Ambassador in Riyadh, and Mr. Rasmus of the Danish Embassy for their continued concern in regards to my health and wellbeing." In December, 12 organisations released an appeal to Bahraini authorities for the immediate and unconditional release of Al-Khawaja and other prisoners of conscience given that they have protested repeatedly about the deteriorating conditions in prison, which mimic the general deterioration of conditions in Bahrain for HRDs and civil society.

During May 2017 a serious clampdown unfolded against human rights activism and marked the severe deterioration of the civic space in Bahrain. After being summoned by the National Security Agency (NSA) in Muharraq, blogger **Hassan Al-Sharqi** declared in his tweet on 28 May that he will stop tweeting. Reports confirmed that he was insulted, beaten and ordered by a security officer to stop his online activities.

HRDs have also been summoned and reportedly tortured during interrogation. On 27 May 2017, WHRD **Ebtisam Al-Saegh**, the monitoring and documentation officer of the Salam Organisation (Peace for Democracy and Human Rights), was summoned by the NSA to Muharraq police station. Seven hours later, she was released but was immediately taken to hospital in a very bad psychological state after suffering a "severe nervous breakdown."

According to **Sayed Yousif Al-Muhafdah**, Vice-President of Salam and a Board member of BCHR, Al-Saegh was subjected to "torture and severe beatings on the head. She was also subjected to psychological torture through a wave of insults and "threats to target her family members if the human rights work was not stopped," in order to force her to publish on her Twitter account a declaration that she would cease her human rights work and resign from Salam. Al-Muhafdah reported that Al-Saegh was forced to repeat the "royal anthem" and when they discovered that she was not saying it properly, they beat her severely, accompanied by insults.

During the interrogation, she was asked about the work of activists inside and outside Bahrain, and about human rights work in Geneva during the sessions of the UN Human Rights Council. Al-Saegh became a target after the pro-government newspaper *Al-Ayam* printed a story on its front page on 12 May, in which it accused Al-Saegh of fabricating reports of human rights violations. Then on 15 May, someone burnt her car. On 3 July 2017, Al-Saegh was again arrested during a raid on her home for the second time in less than two months. On 22 October 2017, Al-Saegh, was released from prison pending trial in Bahrain. While welcoming her temporary release, GCHR called for all charges against her to be dropped as they are clearly related to her human rights activities.

On 23 May 2017, activist **Adel Al-Marzook**, member of the Human Rights Observatory of the Al-Wehdawi Society, was also summoned by the NSA in Muharraq. After being released on 24 May, he tweeted that he resigns from his position as a human rights observer in the Al-Wehdawi Society and he stops all his human rights activities. Reports confirmed that he was ill-treated during detention and forced to remain standing for 18 hours.

On 28 May 2017, the head of the Monitoring and Documentation Team at the Bahrain Human Rights Society (BHRS), **Abduljalil Yousef**, was summoned to the security compound in Muharraq. He was interrogated about his human rights activities with BHRS and about his private life. He was interrogated for four hours and after his release he reported that he was subjected to insults and psychological torture and was threatened that if he does not leave his work in the field of human rights, he will be exposed and his family will be targeted.

Other HRDs have been also been jailed. On 24 May 2017, the third grand criminal court, headed by Judge Sheikh Rashid bin Ahmed Al Khalifa, amended the sentence of Dr. **Taha Al-Derazi** from six months to three months in detention. Dr. Al-Derazi was taken into custody to begin carrying out the sentence. On 15 August 2016, Dr. Al-Derazi was charged with “illegal gathering”, following his arrest and interrogation on 14 August. He was held for nine days. The charges relate to his peaceful assembly during a gathering on 19 July 2016 in the village of Duraz, which has been blockaded by police since June after large-scale protests began following the revocation of the citizenship of Bahrain’s religious leader Sheikh Isa Qassim. It’s illegal to gather with more than five people in Bahrain.

The previous week, on 23 May, authorities violently cracked down on peaceful protests in Duraz killing five people including human rights defender **Mohammed Kadhem Mohsen**, Deputy President of a local chapter of Friends of the Environment. Another protester who was killed is **Mohammed Hamadan**, the older brother of 18-year-old **Mustafa Hamadan**, who died in March after he was shot in the head in January while peacefully protesting in Duraz. At least 286 were arrested in Duraz on 23 May 2017, following a violent crackdown and police raids on the home of a prominent cleric and surrounding homes.

On the morning of 23 May, protests began peacefully after Qassim was handed a one-year suspended sentence on 21 May on charges related to alleged money laundering, along with a fine of 100,000 Bahraini dinars (approx. USD\$265,000.) The Ministry of Interior (MOI) said it arrested 50 people from Qassim’s home, with Bahrain’s official television announcing that 286 people had been arrested in Duraz on 23 May. Many homes were raided. On 26 January 2017, 18-year-old Mustafa Hamdan was shot in the head with live ammunition during the sit-in in Duraz. The medic who attempted to treat him on the street was subsequently arrested. After arriving at a private hospital, he was refused treatment due to the MOI’s instructions; and by the time he was taken to Salmaniya, he was declared brain dead. He died on 24 March.

On 04 June, Bahrain’s Information Affairs Authority (IAA) suspended “Al-Wasat” newspaper until further notice, for allegedly violating the law and repeating the publication of and broadcasting news that stirs up the community and affects the relations of the Kingdom of Bahrain with other countries. The suspension relates to an article published on 04 June 2017, which was accused of “abuse of one of the Arab countries.”

On 24 June, the newspaper notified its employees in an e-mail of the decision to lay off all staff. The letter, signed by the Chairman of Dar Al-Wasat Publishing and Distribution Company, **Adel Al-Maskati**, says, "We regret to inform you that the board of directors of the company has decided to terminate employment contracts with employees, due to the suspension of "Al-Wasat" newspaper activity, as per the Ministry of Information's decision of 04 June 2017 and the resulting losses to the company." The layoff affects 160 people employed by the company, including 30 foreign nationals.

On 06 September, WHRD **Zainab Al-Khamees**, a member of the Bahrain Human Rights Society (BHRS), was summoned for investigation. She is among the many women and men human rights defenders who have been persecuted over their human rights activities, as the authorities seek to pressure them to stop their work. On 5 September, three military jeeps and a fourth civilian vehicle arrived at the house of Al-Khamees, where a summons letter issued by the General Directorate of Investigations and Forensic Science was handed over requiring her to appear before the agent Khalid Al-Tamimi on 6 September 2017 in the Prosecutor's office to investigate her human rights activities. Al-Khamees was questioned about her whereabouts on 11 August and accused of taking part in an un-authorized protest in Aali village. She was then released but was banned from travelling to the Dublin Platform organised by Front Line Defenders on 17-19 October 2017.

KUWAIT

GCHR released an alternative report on 28 July to the Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD) on the discrimination against Bedoon community in Kuwait. The report present recommendations to the authorities in Kuwait to resolve the conditions of statelessness in Kuwait and commit to abolishing discrimination against the Bedoon by designing and implementing appropriate legislation and enforcement mechanism in light of CERD.

At the beginning of the year, a well-known Bedoon rights activist and observer of human rights violations in Kuwait, **Abdulkhaleq Al-Fadhli**, remained detained even after his sentence was finished. To protest this arbitrary decision to not release him, Al-Fadhli started a hunger strike on 22 February to demand his release. GCHR urged the Kuwaiti authorities to grant Al-Fadhli unconditional and immediate release and to rescind the deportation decision. Al-Fadhli was protesting his one-year prison sentence with labour followed by deportation. Al-Fadhli suspended his hunger strike on 03 March. He has undertaken four hunger strikes while in the Central Prison to protest his most recent arrest and ill-treatment.

On 01 August, Al-Fadhli was conditionally released on bail of \$1650 by the Court of Cassation after serving half his sentence of two-years in prison for a Bedoon rights protest. His release was conditional upon signing a declaration in which he pledges to abstain from pursuing any forms of activism or participation in the future, indicating the criminalization of his protests and freedom of assembly. The Court stopped the deportation sentence as Al-Fadhli signed this declaration.

Women HRD and activist, **Hadeel Buqra** and 30 other WHRDs were subjected to harassment and threats via email and the phone, in addition to on social media after joining Saudi women solidarity campaign: Walking for Her on 05 April. The WHRDs were slandered and smeared by the media. GCHR called on the authorities to investigate this media smearing campaign of the WHRDs and to grant them full protection from the threats they received.

On 27 November, the Court of Appeal sentenced 67 people for storming the Parliament in 2011. The charges were for “unauthorised assembly”, “violence against the National Guards of the Parliament”, and “destruction of state property”. Opposition leader Mussalam Al-Barrak was sentenced to seven years in prison (plus an additional two years on another charge) and **Sulaiman Bin Jassim**, the founder of the National Committee for Monitoring Violations, was sentenced to five years although the Court of First Instance in 2013 acquitted them. Others are current and former Members of Parliament and HRDs who were sentenced from one to seven years in prison. The Court suspended the sentence of seven individuals whose sentences ranged from one to two years. That case is ongoing.

OMAN

The main crackdown in Oman throughout 2017 was on the freedom of thought and expression. In January, HRD **Saeed Jadad** found himself under a travel ban at Salalah Airport on his way to Doha. He was informed that remarkably, his travel ban ends in 2099.

The High Court of Oman revoked the prison sentence of the activist **Hassan Al-Basham** who has been sent to prison by the Court of Appeal in Sohar in 2016. Al-Basham was sentenced for three years on charges of “insulting the sultan”, and “use of the Internet in ways that may be prejudiced to religious views.” Al-Basham unveiled corruption in Oman and stood up for prisoners of conscience. Al-Basham’s three-year prison sentence was upheld on 19 November by the Court of Appeal in Muscat. The trial was unfair as the defence was not heard. Al-Basham is a victim of continued judicial harassment as he was imprisoned in 2015 by the Internal Security Service and charged in June 2016 for “insulting the sultan.” His sentence was revoked by the High Court in 2017. Writer and activist **Hamood Al-Shukaily**’s appeal has been accepted by the Appeal Court in Muscat. The judicial authorities expressed their dismay with the appeal highlighting that the appeal was accepted “in form but rejected in substance.” The three-year prison sentence imposed by the Court of First Instance in Muscat was overturned. It is important to note that the bail for Al-Shukaily to submit his appeal was as high as \$13,000. The charges were for “publishing a poem on Facebook”, “incitement of protest”, “protesting *Azamn* arrests”.

Violation of freedom of movement was imposed by the Omani government on journalist **Mohammed Al-Fazari** on 30 January on the Oman-UAE borders when he attempted to fly to Dubai. Al-Fazari’s family was taken by the Special Division, a branch of the Internal Security Service. This violation falls within the repressive measures taken by the Omani government particular to the case of *Azamn* newspaper. Although the Court of Appeal on 23 January revoked the closure of the newspaper, the Ministry of Information extended the closure defying the judicial order.

Writer, online activist and cinema critic **Abdullah Habib** had an appeal hearing on 13 March 2017 during which a verdict was expected. However, it was postponed indefinitely to collect documents related to the case. The hearings have been consistently adjourned for Habib since his sentence on 08 November 2016 to three-year in prison for “using the Internet in what would prejudice the state public order” which is a violation of Article 19 in the Information Technology Crime Act.

The Public Prosecution in its annual press conference on 27 March, announced that activists in exile, who post online content criticising the government, will be prosecuted according to the mandate of the law on the Extradition of Criminals. This statement by the Public Prosecutor is a manifestation of the government's repression of freedoms of opinion and expression that attempts to extend even beyond its territorial control. This constitutes a threat to the ability of activists and HRDs in exile to exercise their human rights and compromises their security and safety.

Ibrahim Al-Ma'amari, Editor-in-Chief of "Azamn" newspaper, was released on 10 April after completing his six-month sentence in prison on charges related to an article on judicial corruption published in *Azamn* newspaper in July 2016. The newspaper remains shut by orders of the Ministry.

In July and August 2016, Al-Ma'amari, journalist Zaher Al-Abri, member of the editorial committee, and Yousef Al-Haj, Deputy Editor-in-Chief of the newspaper were arrested after the newspaper published an article on 26 July 2016 entitled "Supreme bodies tie the hands of justice." On 26 September 2016, the Court of First Instance in Muscat sentenced Ibrahim Al-Maamari, Yousef Al-Haj, and Zaher Al-Abri, to prison and ordered the newspaper to close permanently. At a hearing held on 26 December 2016, the Court of Appeal acquitted Al-Abri while sentencing Al-Haj to one year in prison and Al-Maamari to six months in prison, to include the time they have spent in detention. The court also revoked the decision to shut down "Azamn" newspaper which was issued by the Ministry of Information. Journalist Al-Haj was released on 23 October.

On 05 October 2017, the Supreme Court ruled to permanently shut *Azamn* newspaper. The ruling came after the Public prosecution contested the ruling of the Court of Appeal and accordingly the Supreme Court ruled the permanent shutdown of the paper. The President of the Supreme Court, Issac Al-Bousaidi, is implicated in the article unveiling corruption in Oman's judiciary that lead to the closure of the newspaper on corruption in Oman's judiciary. GCHR contested the verdict as the decision was made through a process that violates international standards for fair trial and due process.

Targeting activists continued and further criminalisation of exercising online freedoms of expression and opinion intensified. On 15 April, Internet activist **Khalid Al-Ramadani** was arrested at the Omani-UAE borders and transferred to the Special Division without access to his family or a lawyer. The arrest follows his criticism of government corruption on his personal Facebook account. **Ahmed Al-Bahri** was summoned by the Internal Security Service on 17 April for interrogation over posting criticism of the government on his personal Facebook account. Al-Bahri was one of the most notable leaders of a teacher's strike in 2011 and was sentenced to a one-year prison sentence for "disrupting public order" in 2014. This sentence was suspended by paying a fine of \$2600.

The crackdown on online freedom extends beyond the case of *Azamn* newspaper and reached *Mowaten* online magazine. The website of *Mowaten* was blocked on 03 May, World Press Freedom Day, following orders from the Internal Security Service. The magazine has been on hiatus since January 2016 to ensure the safety and security of its contributing journalists and writers and was scheduled to resume on 03 May. Upon its relaunch, the government blocked access to their website.

Mansour Bin Nasser Al-Mahrazi was detained for two months pending trial for two books he authored on government corruption. The charges pertaining to these publications are “insulting the sultan” and “undermining the status of the country”. Al-Mahrazi was sentenced then on 23 May to three years in prison, a fine of \$1300 and bail at \$5200 to appeal the sentence. The trial did not meet international standards for fair trial as the judge refused to hear defence witnesses. Moreover, Al-Mahrazi’s publications have been retrieved from the market.

QATAR

A travel ban has been imposed on the human rights lawyer, Dr. Najeeb Al-Nuaimi, without a judicial procedure. The travel ban was renewed on 26 June although revoked by the Court of Appeal on 30 May. Al-Nuaimi is renowned for defending prisoners of conscience including **Mohamed Al-Ajami**, the Qatari poet who was imprisoned between 2011 and 2016 on state security charges.

Mohamed Al-Otaibi, a HRD from Saudi Arabia, was forcibly deported by Qatari authorities to Saudi Arabia. Al-Otaibi left Saudi Arabia after his work was criminalised in violation of his rights to freedom of assembly, opinion and expression. He was charged with working in an unlicensed society, signing statements, advocating for human rights and suffered restrictions on his freedom of movement as he was under a travel ban from 2012 until January 2017. Al-Otaibi was heading to Norway where he was granted asylum. GCHR warned that Al-Otaibi risked being subject to torture and an unfair trial. Amnesty International warned against the deportation of Al-Otaibi as he was a former prisoner of conscience for three-and-a-half years, appealing to the principle of non-refoulement to highlight the violation of the decision to deport activists.

SAUDI ARABIA

Two defenders were arrested in early January while charges pertaining to their arrest were not declared. The Criminal Investigation Department in Mecca summoned HRD **Essam Koshak** on 08 January 2017. On arrival he was arrested and detained and ordered to appear before the Bureau of Investigation and Public Prosecution in Mecca the next day. He was interrogated over postings made on Twitter, including his support for ending the guardianship system for women. He also supports the rule of law and human rights reforms in Saudi Arabia. On 09 January, his detention was extended, and he was not released on bail.

Earlier on 05 January, HRD **Ahmed Al-Mshikhs**, co-founder of Al-Adalah Centre for Human Rights in Saudi Arabia, was summoned by the Criminal Investigation Department in Al-Qatif to be later detained in Al-Qatif police prison. Al-Mshikhs was transferred on 08 January to the Bureau of Investigation and Public Prosecution in Al-Dammam and held in Al-Dammam general prison. On 01 February, Al-Mshikhs was released from prison on bail without charge. Yet he remains at risk of further judicial harassment and trial.

Abdulaziz Al-Shubaili, member of ACPRA, was sentenced to eight years in prison, following a hearing on 10 January 2017 by the Specialised Criminal Court (SCC). Although Al-Shubaili appealed the verdict, and after deliberation, the SCC issued a new verdict against Al-Shubaili. The verdict was the same as the 29 May 2016 verdict which is an eight-year sentence in prison, followed by another eight years banned from writing on social media, in addition to a travel ban of eight years to begin after the sentence has been served.

The court ignored all the notes presented by Al-Shubaili, who had decided earlier not to recognise the court because he believed that "human rights and people that have views should not be tried and convicted of terrorist offenses as the Saudi government is doing now using the Law for Crimes of Terrorism and its Financing." Al-Shubaili was charged for publishing a statement calling for demonstrations; accusing judges of dishonesty and human rights violations; and preparing, storing and sending data affecting public order, in addition to participating in an unauthorised association.

The SCC sentenced the writer **Nadhir Al-Majid** on 18 January 2017 to seven years' imprisonment followed by seven years of a travel ban in addition to a fine. Reports have confirmed that the writer was alone during the hearing and not accompanied by his family or his lawyer. Al-Majid was transferred immediately after the verdict was made to Al-Ha'ir prison in Riyadh. Charges pressed against Al-Majid include: "failing to obey the ruler, participating in demonstrations, writing articles supporting protests (from 2007), in addition to having contact with correspondents of foreign news agencies - namely Reuters, AFP, and CNN".

Samar Badawi, award-winning WHRD, was summoned by the Bureau of Investigation and Prosecution in Jeddah. On 15 February 2017, Badawi appeared before the Bureau to investigate one of her tweets related to her calls for civil and political rights, essentially the women's campaign against male guardians. Badawi has been under a travel ban since December 2014.

In February, GCHR released a statement to announce its support for Saudi WHRDs in their struggle to abolish the male guardianship system. The campaign to end male guardianship in Saudi Arabia received widespread support across the country, and thousands of social media users joined the campaign #IAmMyOwnGuardian. Women activists submitted thousands of letters to the King of Saudi Arabia to end the country's guardianship system. Another petition to end the guardianship was signed by 15,000 people (men and women) and was submitted to the king.

In this light, **Mariam Al-Otaibi**, a prominent woman activist on social media, was rebuked by her brothers for her engagement in promoting the campaign. Al-Otaibi asked the authorities to protect her from domestic violence. In return, her father filed a disobedience case against her which led to her detention in the women's prison. Al-Otaibi had to drop her violence report against her brothers, in order for her father to drop the disobedience case against her – one of the crimes that requires detention according to Saudi law. **Al-Otaibi** was released on 31 July 2017, after more than 100 days. Reports confirmed she has been released without the presence of a guardian.

Following the excessive crackdown on women's struggle against the guardianship system, **Dina Ali Lasloom** and **Alaa Alanzi** were arrested. Lasloom was arrested for her attempt to seek asylum in Australia while Alanzi was detained upon her attempt to retrieve information and updates on Lasloom. On 13 April 2017, Lasloom was deported from the Philippines against her will. Lasloom arrived in Manila airport en-route to Australia, where she intended to file for asylum to escape a forced marriage. She posted a video of herself requesting help for fear of being killed by her family, after the authorities in Manila airport confiscated her passport. Meaghan Khan, a woman passenger from Canada, met Lasloom while she was waiting for her own flight in the airport and gave a detailed statement on the brutality of the deportation process. Activists on social media circulated Lasloom's video and pictures under the hashtag #SaveDinaAli.

The Saudi Embassy in the Philippines posted a statement describing the incident of Lasloom's forced deportation as a family matter. Several Saudi citizens posted an online call to meet Lasloom upon her arrival to Riyadh in an effort to assure her safety.

Alaa Alanzi responded to the online call to meet Lasloom at Riyadh airport and to ensure her safety. As Lasloom did not leave the flight with other passengers, Alanzi went to the security office to request information and then was herself detained. A call was made on twitter to #ReleaseAlaaAlanzi. Two days later, a statement was published in a local news agency stating that Riyadh police arrested Alanzi and a young man while they were taking pictures of the airport police and the police vehicles to document the arrival of the Saudi woman. The statement mentioned that the investigation revealed that Alanzi shared the pictures with a group of other concerned citizens to circulate on social media (a potential crime under the Saudi cybercrimes law). The statement also indicated that Alanzi was detained at a girls' correctional facility in Riyadh and the young man was detained at the airport police station until the general prosecution office took the necessary measures.

On 17 April 2017, King Salman Bin Abdulaziz issued a Royal decree instructing governmental entities in Saudi Arabia to provide services for women without requiring the permission of their male guardians unless mandated by a legal regulation. At the time the decree was issued, three women were detained for resisting the guardianship system. After the decree was issued, only one of them, Alanzi, was released on 18 April after she had been detained for seven days while Dina Ali Lasloom and Mariam Al-Otaibi remained detained.

Khaled Al-Omair was released on 12 April 2017 six months beyond his eight-year sentence. On 3 November 2016, he was transferred from Al-Ha'ir prison in Riyadh to Mohammed bin Nayef Counseling and Care Centre in preparation for his release.

Ali Shaaban, the HRD and blogger, was arrested on 15 May 2017 by security forces and transferred to Al-Qadif General Prison. He had no access to his family or lawyer and the only communication was when the police called his brother to collect Shabaan's daughter. Reports confirmed that his arrest and detention are related to his online activities.

The government continued tightening and repressing freedoms of expression and assembly of women activists resisting the exercise of male guardianship. On 04 June 2017, women's rights activist **Loujain Al-Hathloul** was arrested by Saudi security forces at King Fahd International Airport in Dammam upon her arrival and was released three days later without further charges. Her arrest and detention are related to her activism in defending women's rights, and in particular her involvement in the Women's Driving Campaign in Saudi Arabia.

After he has been forced to leave his country Saudi Arabia to seek asylum in Qatar, Mohammed Al-Otaibi on 23 April called on the international community to support his call for protection. Al-Otaibi appealed to the international community to protect him under the 1951 UN Convention and its 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees and to either resettle him in Qatar or to be resettled in a third country. He was detained in Intelligence Prison in the city of Al-Damam after he was denied access to his family or lawyer pending trial on 12 July 2017.

On 14 August 2017, HRD Abdulaziz Al-Shubaili, was notified that the SCC of Appeal in Riyadh upheld the full preliminary sentence issued against him. Notably, the SCC of Appeal did not hold any hearings in order to reach its conclusion, which reflects the lack of the minimum required international standards for fair trial and due process.

Authorities continued harassment of ACPRA by arresting Issa Al-Hamid and Abdulaziz Al-Shubaili, on 16 and 17 September 2017, respectively. Information from local sources suggests that the arrests are to execute the sentences imposed on them earlier.

In August, human rights defenders Issa Al-Nukhaifi and Essam Koshak were brought to court over their human rights activities, where they learned of charges against them. They remained at Al-Ha'ir Criminal Prison in Riyadh pending trial on 04 October 2017.

A wave of crackdown on HRDs, academics and activists have launched by the Saudi government. In September, 20 prominent activists have been detained. The activism and advocacy of these defenders ranged from economic reform, political and civil rights and ending the guardianship system. On 12 September 2017, academics Dr. Mustafa Al-Hassan and Abdullah Al-Malki were arrested on separate instances, no information pertaining to their detention were announced. On the same day, Essam Al-Zamel, an entrepreneur known for his writing about the need for economic reform, was also arrested.

Internet activist **Naimah Al-Matrood** was arrested and detained by the Directorate of Public Investigation since April 2016. Al-Matrood was detained for a year before the first hearing of her trial which commenced on 13 April 2017. The trial started without the presence of her lawyer or family members. On 09 May 2017, the SCC held its second hearing in the trial of Al-Matrood, who is charged with participating in a number of anti-state demonstrations and rallies, being linked to a media cell, and violating public order by creating two social networking accounts on Twitter, Facebook advocating the release of some detainees. On 10 November, the SCC in Riyadh sentenced her to six years in prison followed by a six-year travel ban.

HRD **Sulaiman Al-Rashudi** was released on 12 December after being imprisoned for five years. Al-Rashudi had been sentenced to prison upon the publication of one of his lectures titled: “The Legitimacy of Demonstrations in Islamic Law”. Eight other HRDs and Al-Rashudi, known as the “Reformists of Jeddah”, in February 2017 were sentenced to 15 years in prison followed by a 15-year travel ban. Al-Rashudi spent five years of this sentence until he was released on bail in 2011. Although Al-Rashudi remained free on bail until the legal process, he was arrested in December 2012. The eight activists’ 15-years sentence was ratified after the arrest of Al-Rashudi.

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

On 16 January, academic and activist Dr. **Abdulkhaleq Abdulla** was arrested by state security apparatus for his tweets that called for freedom of expression. Details were not provided on his arrest, charges or whereabouts. Academic and economist, Dr. Nasser Bin Ghaith was arrested on 18 August 2015 and detained in solitary confinement for nine months to be later transferred to Al-Sader jail where his illness received no medical attention. Dr. Bin Ghaith was sentenced over tweets on charges of “committing hostile act against a foreign state”, “posting false information to harm state’s status and institution” and “posting false information on the UAE leaders and policies”. At a hearing on 29 March, when he was sentenced to 10 years in prison. The trial did not adhere to international trial standards or principles of due process. Abdullah, on the other hand, was released from detention on 26 January.

On 19 March, GCHR released a call for action to stop the arbitrary detention of the HRD Osama Al-Najjar who remained in detention even after fully serving his sentence which ended on 17 March. Al-Najjar's three-year sentence was solely for his exercise of right to freedom of expression and opinion. The call for action involved echoing the release on social media using the hashtag #Free_Osama, sending letter to the Prime Minister office, Ministry of Interior and Crown Prince Court.

Ahmed Mansoor was arrested on 20 March from his home and taken to an unknown location, where he was presumed to be at risk of torture. Mansoor is a member of the Advisory Board of GCHR and a member of the Advisory Committee of Human Rights Watch's Middle East and North Africa division. Previous judicial harassment was most manifest in the case of UAE5 when he was arrested with four other activists for signing a petition (with a total of 133 signatories) to call for democratic reform in the UAE, particularly by granting universal suffrage. Although pardoned and released from the charges of "insulting officials", Mansoor was under travel ban since 2011. This arrest, on 20 March 2017, was accompanied with confiscation of his belongings. Mansoor's arrest is linked to his tweets calling for the release of Al-Najjar and the letter he signed with other activists from the region at the Arab Summit in Jordan. The UAE released a statement on 29 March to dispute that Mansoor's arrest was arbitrary. The charges for which Mansoor was arrested for are: promoting sectarian and hate-inciting agenda, threatening state's reputation according to terms of cybercrimes law.

On 20 April, 91 organisations signed a statement to call for the release of Mansoor one month after his arrest. The statement urged UAE authorities to allow Mansoor immediate and regular access to his family and a lawyer of his choice and to end harassment of HRDs and government critics. United Nations experts expressed their worries that Mansoor's arrest indicates that governments are scrutinising those who cooperate with United Nation's mechanisms. The Working Group on Arbitrary Detention and Working Group on Enforced and Involuntary Disappearances on 28 March made a statement which acknowledged the efforts of Mansoor in the protection of human rights and advancement of democracy for the whole region.

On International Human Rights Day, 10 December, GCHR re-stressed its appeal condemning the arbitrary arrest and detention of Mansoor.

On 28 March, before the hearing session of Dr. Bin Ghaith's case on 29 March, GCHR and nine other human rights organisations signed a statement to urge UAE authorities to immediately and unconditionally release Bin Gaith and other prisoners of conscience. The statement protests the UAE's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dr. Anwar Gargash, address in the Human Rights Council 34th Session on 28 February in which he asserted that the UAE is committed to respect human rights and fundamental freedoms while Dr. Bin Ghaith, other defenders and activist and individuals are detained and tried for exercising their freedom of expression and opinion. After the hearing session, on 29 March authorities did not consider the constant appeals and sentenced Dr. Bin Ghaith to ten-years in prison. The verdict also ordered the confiscation of Dr. Bin Ghaith's devices and tools used to execute the following: communicating with secret organisations related to the Muslim brotherhood, creating social media accounts and publishing photos and articles that are offensive to state symbols and values, internal and foreign policies which affects UAE's relation with an Arab state.

Since his transfer to Al-Razeen prison, Dr. Bin Ghaith has been held incommunicado. Al-Razeen prison is a maximum-security prison which keeps political prisoners, prisoners of conscience, and HRDs. Dr. Bin Ghaith has announced in a letter on 02 April that he started a hunger strike to protest his sentence. GCHR called for the immediate release for Dr. Bin Ghaith and other prisoners of conscience, to allow him access to his family and lawyer of his choice, and on the respective authorities to investigate his allegations of torture and ill-treatment.

Jailed human rights lawyer Dr. **Mohammed Al-Roken**, was awarded the Ludovic-Trarieux International Human Rights Prize for 2017 on 10 November. Dr. Al-Roken is serving a ten-year sentence and was unable to accept the prestigious award, so **Mohammed Al-Saqer**, a colleague from the now-dissolved Association of Jurists, accepted it on his behalf. Al-Roken and Al-Saqer were tried in a mass, unfair trial of 94 defendants that began in March 2013 before the State Security Chamber of the Federal Supreme Court in Abu Dhabi in the case known as the UAE94. The government accused them of “establishing an organisation that aimed to overthrow the government,” a charge which they all denied. On 02 July 2013, the court convicted 69 of the defendants sentencing them with up to 15 years in prison. Dr. Al-Roken was sentenced to 10 years, and Al-Saqer to five years in prison *in absentia*. Their trials were widely condemned as lacking the minimum international standards of fair trial and due process.

Obaid Al-Zaabi was released on 21 December from prison after three years since he was proven innocent of charges pressed against him. Although Al-Zaabi was acquitted by the court in 2014 after being in prison for a year, State Security Apparatus refused to release him. Al-Zaabi was arrested after commenting to the CNN on the case of Shezzam Cassim. The charges were for: creating a twitter account and accusing State Security of torture.

NEIGHBOURING COUNTRIES

IRAN

On 04 January, GCHR appealed to Iranian authorities about the decisions to impose travel bans and detention on three lawyers and activists. Dr. **Abdolfattah Soltani**, a prominent human rights lawyer and co-founder of the Defenders of Human Rights Centre is detained in the notorious Evin prison serving a 13-year sentence accompanied by an additional 20-year ban from practising his profession as a lawyer based on charges including “spreading propaganda against the system” and “founding an illegal group”.

Human rights lawyer **Nasrin Sotoudeh** remains under a travel ban. Sotoudeh was released in September 2013 after spending over three years in prison of her 11-year sentence, a ban from practising law and a 20-year travel ban. Her prosecution and continued harassment by authorities relate directly to her work as a lawyer in representing human rights defenders and young prisoners sentenced to death.

Human rights lawyer and writer **Emadeddin Baghi** also continues to be subjected to a travel ban. He is founder of the Society for the Defence of Prisoners’ Rights and laureate of the 2009 Martin Ennals Award for Human Rights Defenders. He has advocated for the peaceful improvement of human rights since the 1980s. He has spent several years in prison including in December 2009, when he was arrested during a wave of arrests and spent five months in solitary confinement. Although now released, a travel ban remains in place against him and his basic right of freedom of movement continues to be denied.

Human rights defender Atena Daemi has been in Evin prison in Iran since her arrest on 26 November 2016. Daemi is currently serving a seven-year prison sentence based on charges of “insulting the supreme leader,” “insulting state officials,” “spreading lies,” “resisting arrest” and “assaulting the arresting agent.” The latter charge contradicts witness testimonies. She filed a complaint against the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) for using excessive force - such as pepper spray - during her arrest in November 2016, without even showing a summons.

Daemi started a hunger strike to protest her ill-treatment and sentence. The hunger strike started on 08 April 2017 and upon her deteriorating health condition, Daemi ended her hunger strike at the end of May when she and her sisters were acquitted by an appeal court of resisting arrest. On 23 June, GCHR as a member of the Women Human Rights Defenders International Coalition appealed authorities the release of Daemi.

Journalists have been heavily targeted in Iran. Journalist **Sasan Aghaei**, deputy editor of the daily “Etemad”, has been held in solitary confinement. He was detained by security forces at the newspaper’s offices in Tehran on 12 August 2017 and transferred him to Tehran's Evin prison. The charges against Aghaei are not clear as no official warrant was issued against him. After three days, his family was informed that he was ordered by the Media Court to be detained for a month.

On 01 November, GCHR appealed to Iranian authorities for the immediate and unconditional release of Baquer Namazi who was arrested on 22 February 2016, as he was leaving Tehran airport by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) who Iran to secure the release of his son Siamak Namazi, who was arrested on 13 October 2015 while visiting his family in Tehran. According to reports, Namazi was driven back to his home by the IRGC, who then searched his home and confiscated his possessions. After the search, the IRGC guards informed Namazi that they needed to present him to the magistrate and he was transferred to Evin Prison.

On 22 August 2017, the appeals court in Tehran upheld the ten-year prison sentences for the Namazis. Both Namazis hold dual US and Iranian citizenship. Their arrest and imprisonment forms part of a broader pattern of targeting Iranians who hold dual citizenship, a pattern which was strongly condemned by the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Iran, **Asma Jahangir**, in her report to the UN General Assembly in August 2017.

IRAQ

The onset of 2017 marked the release of Afrah Shawki after she was kidnapped by armed groups on 26 December 2016. Shawki was kidnapped upon the publication of her article on violence in Iraq.

Iraq’s Parliament delayed voting on the freedom of expression and peaceful demonstration bill indefinitely. Protests against the bill were sweeping as the articles of the bill proposed since 2011 were vague and do not observe the Iraqi Constitution. Civil society groups met with the Parliament in order to discuss the articles of the bill in question. Protests brought together different actors such as civil society organisations, trade unions and citizens in order to prevent the bill from being passed

NRT reporter **Aram Bakhtyar** and director **Awat Ali** faced judicial harassment upon the production of a report on a grave penal sentence for petty crime. The report in question featured the disproportional punishment sentencing a man who stole milk and diapers to 11 years in prison. Bakhtyar was arrested on 22 May 2017 and released 14 days later while Ali was arrested on 4 June 2017 and was released the following day on bail. GCHR urged the Iraqi Kurdistan authorities to release them unconditionally.

On 19 June, Iraqi Kurdish journalist **Bakhtiar Haddad** and French journalist **Stéphane Villeneuve** were killed covering counterterrorism operations in Ras Al-Jadah. GCHR called for journalists' safety in Iraq by equipping journalists with adequate safety training that does not jeopardise their lives, as well as an investigation into the killing of the two journalists. Further risks were borne by journalists in Iraq. In October, journalist, **Ribwar Kaki** was attacked during coverage of demonstration in front of the Iraqi parliament. October also saw the death of the death of **Arkan Sharif** who was killed by unknown armed men who stabbed him to death. On these three incidents, GCHR has stressed the importance of investigating the killing of and attacks on journalists and reporters in Iraq, including Iraqi Kurdistan. Impunity for attacks constituted the major violations of journalists' capacity to report freely and safely. The year wound up with an outright attack by security forces who closed NRT offices without a judicial order.

JORDAN

The main violations exhibited in 2017 pertain to journalists and freedom of press and association. On 06 June, the Ministry of Information revoked Al Jazeera's license amid the Gulf countries crisis in which governments introduced measures suspending interaction with Qatar on different levels. Nonetheless, freedom of press is at risk given the politicisation of attacks on news and media outlets justified as part of a political concern. On 11 July, Immigration officers at Queen Alia International Airport denied Egyptian journalist **Wael Mamdouh** entry to Amman to attend a workshop organised by Arab Reporters for Investigative Journalism (ARIJ). Further restriction on freedom of press and expression were evident by the official blocking of the online magazine My.Kali, an LGBTQIA magazine. Jordanian users have reported their inability to access the magazine's website since July 2016 but only on 31 July 2017, the Jordanian Audiovisual Committee ordered the website to be censored as it violated Jordan's Press and Publication Law.

There was a wide crackdown on civil society and particularly rights groups, coupled with antagonisation and criminalisation of civil society activism in pro-government newspapers.

On 31 October, the cartoonist **Emad Hajjaj** was summoned by the public prosecutor to investigate a cartoon published on his Facebook and Twitter accounts in which he depicts Jesus disowning Patriarch Theophilos III following his decision to sell property of the Orthodox Church of Jerusalem to Israel. Hajjaj risked trial against Jordan's restrictive of online freedoms and rights Cybercrime and Press and Publication Laws which if violated are penalised by a prison sentence.

LEBANON

In January, Human Rights Watch reported on military trials of civilians which constitute a blunt violation of human rights. The trials are a form of reprisal by army officials for exercise of freedom of speech and activism. Violations committed in these trials include: trying children, using coercion and torture to extract confessions, arbitrary and unjustified sentences, and interrogation without the presence of a lawyer.

Freedom of press, opinion, expression and protest have been under attack. On 15 February, the office of Al-Jadeed TV was attacked after a [satirical episode](#), aired on 12 February. The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) called on Lebanese authorities to investigate the attacks and ensure the safety of journalists and freedom of press, particularly as Al-Jadeed has been targeted earlier in 2016 and 2012. Criminalisation of online freedom of speech has been a persistent pattern. On 28 January, **Hassan Saad** has been captured and detained to investigate a [Facebook status](#) he posted on 17 January critical of the government. Activist **Ahmad Amhaz** has been arrested on 21 March for [criticising the President, Prime Minister and Speaker of Parliament](#). After nine days of detention, Amhaz was released on bail but standing a trial.

Protesters on 16 June, protesting the suspension of parliamentary elections and the third extension of the Parliament's term, were [subject to military use of force and violence](#) to break the protest. Upon calls from Human Rights Watch to investigate unlawful use of violence, the military prosecutor, Judge Saqr conceded to open an investigation. In spite of this, on 10 December demonstrators of civilians and journalists near the US embassy were subjected to police brutality by the riot police as they [committed indiscriminate and unlawful violence to dismantle the demonstration as some protesters started to throw rocks at security forces](#).

SYRIA

On 29 April, GCHR called for the release of **Razan Zaitouneh** on her birthday. Known as the Douma Four, Zaitouneh, **Wael Hamada**, **Samira Khalil** and **Nazem Hamadi** have been abducted in December 2013 by armed men who raided the offices of Violations Documentation Centre (VDC). GCHR advocated the use of social media and the hashtags [#HappyBirthdayRazan](#), [#FreeRazan](#), and [#Douma4](#), in addition to writing letter to the OHCHR and local newspaper to pressure their release.

Rising for Freedom magazine was banned by the de facto authorities, Army of Islam in Eastern Ghouta. On 11 July 2017, after a trial in Douma, Eastern Ghouta, journalists **Laila Al-Safadi** and **Shawkat Garziddin** were sentenced *in absentia* to two months in prison. Journalist **Osama Nassar**, Assistant Editor-in-Chief and Director, who was present at the entire trial, was found not guilty. The court accused *Rising for Freedom* magazine of defaming the image of God and hurting the feelings of Muslims in Syria. Accordingly, the verdict was to ban the distribution of the magazine. The offices of the magazine and NGOs including the [Violations Documentation Centre \(VDC\)](#) were shut down in March 2017, and VDC was closed again after being attacked by a mob.

WHRD Dr. Orouba Barakat, and her daughter, journalist Halla Barakat, were [found dead on 22 September in Turkey](#). Turkish authorities found that the murder was committed for financial motives. Nonetheless, it is a grave loss as Dr. Orouba Barakat was investigating torture in Syrian prisons, while Halla Barakat was working on producing reports and documentaries on jails and secret detention centers featuring testimonies of ex-detainees. GCHR urged authorities to continue investigations on the murders and pursue more efforts to protect Syrian defenders.

On 02 October, GCHR appealed to [Syrian authorities to release the human rights lawyer Khalil Ma'touq](#) and his assistant **Mohamed Thatha** after five years of their enforced disappearance.

On 12 October, [two journalists were killed in a suicide bombing in Eastern Syrian](#). Another journalist in Rojava was injured on duty. The three journalists work for Hawar News Agency, GCHR condemned the violations committed by indiscriminate attacks on civilians and the lack of adequate safety training and safeguards for journalists and HRDs in conflict-zones.

On 03 May, GCHR released a statement to protest the lack of updates on the whereabouts of Bassel Khartabil. Khartabil had been detained for five years for his activism in support of freedom of speech and access to information. Since his transfer in 2015 to Adra prison, his whereabouts remained unknown. On 01 August 2017, **Noura Ghazi Safadi**, Khartabil's wife, announced on Facebook that her husband has been killed. Khartabil was executed just days after he was taken from Adra prison in October 2015.

In August, 34 organisations signed a statement that condemned the execution of Khartabil. The statement urged the Syrian authorities to disclose the circumstances of the execution of Khartabil; end extrajudicial executions, enforced disappearance, arbitrary arrests, and torture and other ill-treatment; and release all detainees in Syria held for peacefully exercising their legitimate rights to freedom of expression and association. On the International Day of the Victims of Enforced Disappearances, 30 August, 23 organisations signed a statement which appeals to the respective authorities and armed opposition groups to disclose information on victims of enforced disappearances and stop arbitrarily arresting, abducting and detaining people for their peaceful, journalistic, and humanitarian activities – in line with United Nations Security Council resolution 2139, which demands “the release of all arbitrarily detained” in Syria.

YEMEN

GCHR called for an impartial and thorough investigation into the death of journalist Mohammed Al-Abbasi who died on 26 December 2016. An autopsy showed that Al-Abbasi was poisoned by exposure to toxic gas, according to GCHR sources.

On 09 June, eight organisations and GCHR released a joint statement to demand immediate and unconditional release of the ten journalists who have been arbitrarily detained without charges or trial since 09 June 2015. **Abdelkhaleq Amran, Hisham Tarmoom, Tawfiq Al-Mansouri, Hareth Hamid, Hasan Annab, Akram Al-Walidi, Haytham Al-Shihab, Hisham Al-Yousefi and Essam Balgheeth** are detained solely for their peaceful exercise of their rights to freedom of expression and their perceived political opinions.

GCHR participated on a panel discussion during the 35th session of the United Nations Human Rights Council on 20 June on public freedoms in Yemen. The side-event was entitled: “The ongoing attacks on public freedoms in Yemen during wartime”, called for an international investigation into the crimes committed by all sides in the conflict in Yemen. The side event was organised by Mwatana Organization for Human Rights, GCHR, the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS), Human Rights Watch, Index for Censorship, PEN International, OMCT and FIDH under the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, CIVICUS, the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, the Women Human Rights Defenders – International Coalition, and the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ). GCHR released a report on the status of freedom of press and journalists in Yemen, entitled: “Press in Yemen Faces Extinction: Journalists Need Support”.

On 14 August, **Hisham Al-Omeisy** was arrested by Houthi authorities without disclosing cause for arrest or charges. Al-Omeisy is the only English-speaking activist based in Yemen, reporting on the violations committed by parties to the conflict. His writings were particularly critical of the Saudi-led airstrikes and defending human rights. He was finally released in January 2018, thanks to international advocacy.

GCHR renewed its demand for an independent international inquiry on human rights violations in Yemen on 29 August. A joint letter was sent to the Permanent Representatives of Member and Observer States of the United Nations Human Rights Council signed by over 60 organisations, including GCHR. The victims of abuses in Yemen cannot afford to wait longer for credible investigations into ongoing grave violations and abuses to be undertaken.

The inquiry should be given the mandate to establish the facts and circumstances, and to collect and preserve evidence of, and clarify responsibility for, alleged violations and abuses of international human rights law and violations of international humanitarian law, with a view to ending impunity and providing accountability. To support the need for the international investigation inquiry, GCHR released a report on 15 September detailing the different violations and abuses in Yemen and inadequacy of the National Commission's efforts to report and track violations and perpetrators.

Internet access was interrupted in different forms since 06 December, after the murder of former President Ali Abdullah Saleh. Social media networks were completely blocked in Aden and Sabwah while other regions experienced slowed Internet connection and reported inability to access social media websites. Access is necessary and essential to civilians' survival.

IV. Post-Arab Spring Repression: Crackdown on Civil Society in Egypt and GCC Countries

The increasing political and legal restrictions imposed on civil society in the MENA region exhibit similarities. A pattern appears to have originated in Egypt and spilled over to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates after the Arab Spring in 2011 and persists until now. The main political justifications in wider crackdowns are security concerns and scepticism about foreign sources of funding - this is accompanied by accusations of conspiring against the state and collecting intelligence. These countries have developed laws and regulations in order to constrict the registration, operation and sustainability of NGOs where the underlying rationale is to discourage NGOs from operating and particularly to disallow activities of human rights and democracy-related organisations.

Associations Laws: Restrictions on Funding and Activism

Although in 2011 there was a brief moment of opening in the political sphere in Egypt and across the GCC countries, governments exhausted their resources to maintain restrictions and control. From April to May 2011, the UAE had a wide crackdown on civil society organisations, primarily manifested in the dissolution of the board of the Jurist Association and the elected board of directors of the Teachers' Association. The 2008 Law on Association was cited to justify this crackdown as the terms of the law prohibit civil organisations from engaging in "politics." Though Saudi Arabia was in the process of drafting an Associations Law since 2006, it was only approved by the Shura Council in November 2015. The approved law highlights how power remains in the hands of authorities pertaining to the registration and control of organisations to the extent of dissolving their boards like in the UAE and clamping down on human rights organisations as in Egypt.

Similarly, the notorious Case 173 in Egypt (commonly known as the "foreign funding case"), commenced in July 2011 when the cabinet requested the Minister of Justice to filter organisations registered under Law 84 and trace their funding sources to justify a major crackdown to come. An extensive report was compiled in September 2011 by the National Security Agency. In June 2013, 43 workers for national and international NGOs were given one- to five-year prison terms accompanied by the closure of a number of organisations. In 2015, the number of closed organisations surged to a total of 500.

On 24 November 2016, the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS) made a statement with 59 organisations, including GCHR, on the persistent efforts and legal restrictions by the Egyptian government to limit the activities and capacity of civil society organisations and particularly human rights and democracy-related organisations. This closure of the civic space is not new to the Egyptian government and is part of the current political climate of an increased security grip on the civic space and excessive control of civil activities after the events of 2011. At the time, this new civil society organisations law in Egypt was in the drafting process in which restrictions were introduced to all stages of registering, creating, running and operating foreign NGOs. Moreover, organisations' activities are monitored, sanctioned and permitted by an overseeing entity named the National Agency for Regulation of Foreign NGOs. This agency consists of representatives from three security agencies. In the wake of concluding this legislation, in December 2016, the assets of six NGO board members and directors were seized, 15 HRDs were placed under a travel ban and three human rights organisations have been frozen in light of Case 173.

Travel Ban: Reprisals and Violation of Freedom of Movement

Travel bans on HRDs and activists is a highly favourable measure by governments for two reasons. First, it is an indirect intimidation tactic to citizens. Second, it is an attempt by governments to curtail the capacity of HRDs to voice their concerns, report the violations and pursue activism in regional and international platforms. Travel bans allow governments to fulfill this without incurring the political costs of other means such as enforced disappearances and torture. Nonetheless, a travel ban is an outright violation of mobility rights and freedom of movement as mandated in Article 13 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In March 2016, the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights noted that 10 prominent HRDs were under a travel ban. Most notably, they included **Gamal Eid, Hossam Bahgat, Mohamed Lotfy**, en route to Germany in June 2015 and **Esraa Abdelfattah and three of her colleagues** in December 2014.

The rest of the GCC countries have also followed suit and relied on travel bans to further silence the activism of HRDs. In Bahrain, a number of prominent HRDs have been banned from travelling including **Hussain Radhi, Ebtisam Al-Saegh, Ebrahim Al-Demistani, Abdunabi Al-Ekry** and the journalist Nazeera Saeed. In November 2017, the Bahraini HRD **Nedal Al-Salman** was added to the list of HRDs banned from travelling while at the airport leaving to Toronto. In the UAE, Ahmed Mansoor was under a travel ban since his release in 2011 and before his arbitrary arrest in March 2017 as well as **Dr. Mohammed Al-Mansoori, Jumaa Al-Felasy, Musabeh Al-Rumaithy** and **Rashid Al-Shamsy** who were banned from travel since 2012.

Travel ban is a repressive and reprisal tool in Saudi Arabia. In 2012, human rights lawyer **Waleed Abu Al-Khair** found himself under a travel ban as he was leaving to the United States. In the 2017 cases of Abdulaziz Al-Shubaili and Nadhir Al-Majed, their prison sentences are followed by the same term in the form of a travel ban which constitutes a magnified reprisal.

In short, travel bans and the decision to freeze assets and operations of NGOs is dedicated not only to crack down on civic space and civil society but as well to silencing all attempts at documenting and reporting violations of human rights. The key message delivered by these trends is that the inability of defenders, lawyers and organisations to protect and secure themselves leaves the citizens at large unable to seek assistance from repressive governments.

V. Conclusion

The expansion of government harassment and targeting of HRDs, activists, journalists, media trainers and photographers, bloggers and NGOs across the region denotes a worrisome phenomenon of annihilating the efforts holding perpetrators of human rights violations accountable. On the other hand, this phenomenon is also correlated with increased challenges in resisting the continued criminalisation of HRDs and human rights NGOs. Advocacy tools are effective on the level of the United Nations, however, without the political will and commitment of governments and the international community, the effectiveness of advocacy is very limited.

There is a need for developing and facilitating more solid collaboration on issues pertaining to freedom of press, expression, opinion and assembly. Notably, as these freedoms are closely tied with rights that governments violate under various or no justifications at all.

In Syria, Iraq and Yemen, journalists have been subject to enforced disappearances for covering and updating on the situation of conflict-zones and killed while on duty. It is essential to iterate the need for collaborative action to delegitimise the former and increase commitment on holding the perpetrators accountable while for the latter, it is mandatory for the respective authorities to investigate these killings thorough as it also implicates violations of international human rights law killing civilians.

In the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Bahrain, activists remain targeted for their activism and advocacy efforts to publicise the different violations by their respective governments. Ahmed Mansoor remains targeted even though he remained under a travel ban since the UAE 5 case in 2011. Bahrain is systematically targeting families of activists in exile and remains uncommitted to international principles on fair treatment of prisoners, who are imprisoned in the first place for their activism. Reports of torture and ill-treatment persist during the Universal Periodic Review process. Although the most conservative Gulf country, Saudi Arabia, is introducing wide-spectrum political and economic reform, it is still solidly violating human rights. Women HRDs have been detained for calling for the right to drive, while the government expresses its intent to lift the driving ban in June 2018. As it is heavily scrutinised in Saudi Arabia to advocate for rights of the marginalised and oppressed, it is mirrored with the same level in Kuwait by severe crackdowns on Bedoon rights activists.

VI. Recommendations

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

- Guarantee the right to freedom of expression and freedom of opinion, through all possible measures including protecting journalists, media workers and online activists from any reprisals or judicial harassment;
- Provide safe spaces and secure environments for WHRDs to work freely and more effectively on human rights issues;
- Ensure that legislation, including cyber-crime legislation and anti-terrorism legislation, is not used as a tool for targeting human rights defenders for their peaceful human rights work, including by the amendment of such legislation where necessary;
- Ensure that the right to peaceful freedom of assembly is respected and protected so that people are allowed to protest peacefully without fear of physical violence, intimidation or any form of reprisals;
- Ensure that the right to peaceful freedom of association is respected and protected so that independent human rights NGOs may operate safely and free from judicial harassment, arrest and abuse;
- Guarantee the promotion and protection of civil society and cherish its role in society as a means of fostering human rights;
- Amend any national laws to ensure security of residence status for all residents and prevent the use, or threat of use, of nationality laws as a means of stifling civil society;
- Ensure that all those detained are treated with dignity, their physical and psychological integrity is protected and that conditions in all detention facilities are in line with international standards;
- Ensure that all those detained are protected from any form of ill-treatment and torture as set out in international law;
- Guarantee that where there is evidence of torture or ill-treatment by state authorities, that a prompt and independent investigation is established with a view to bringing those responsible to justice in line with international standards;
- Ensure that access to justice is guaranteed to all and that any legal proceedings taken adhere to the right to a fair trial and international fair legal procedures standards;
- Provide adequate channels and mechanisms for reporting and investigating any form of harassment, intimidation or targeting of human rights defenders, by state authorities and other parties, as a result of their peaceful and legitimate human rights work;
- Ensure that all human rights defenders, and all citizens, are free to avail of and engage with the UN human rights mechanisms and the international human rights community;
- Engage with UN human rights mechanisms where to do so would benefit the promotion and protection of human rights; and
- Ensure that human rights defenders are able to carry out their legitimate and peaceful human rights work without fear of reprisals and free from all restrictions.