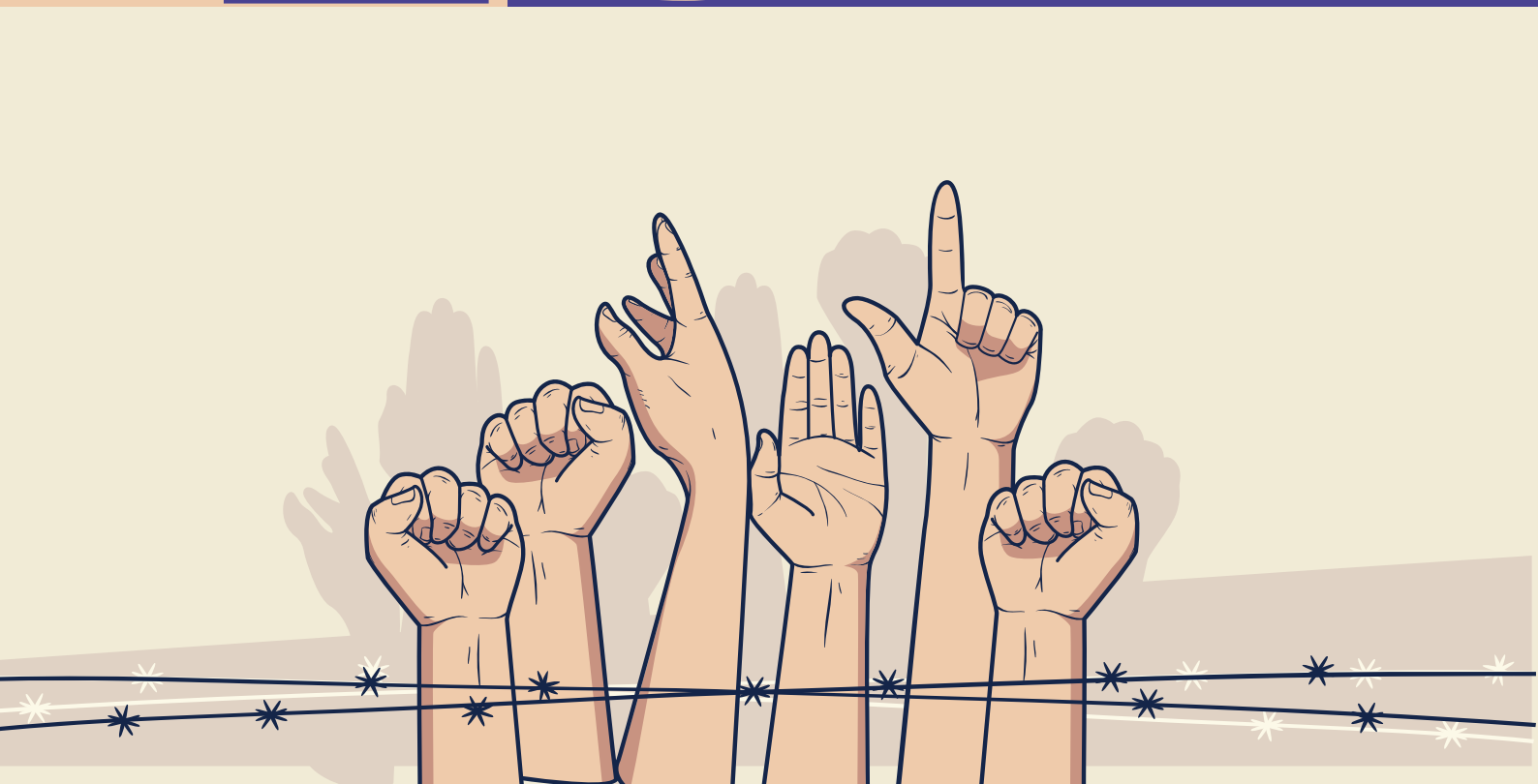




2023

Annual Report of the Gulf  
Centre for Human Rights

**HUMAN  
RIGHTS**  
in the Middle  
East Region





Gulf Centre for Human Rights

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## Human Rights in the Middle East Region

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Gulf Centre for Human Rights

Annual Report 2023

March 2024

# ABOUT GCHR

## WHO WE ARE

The Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation that was founded in April 2011 by human rights defenders in the Gulf region and neighbouring countries. It receives guidance from an Advisory Board composed of regional and international human rights advocates, including academics and lawyers.

## WHERE WE WORK

GCHR is based in Lebanon and documents the environment for HRDs in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) with an emphasis on the Gulf region and neighbouring countries, specifically Bahrain, Kuwait, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen. GCHR regularly covers violations in other countries in the region, such as Egypt or Palestine. GCHR includes other MENA countries in consultations and activities based on our theory of change that suggests the human rights situation is more likely to improve in the Gulf countries once other important countries in the region such as Tunisia, Egypt, Syria and Iraq have witnessed a peaceful change in terms of the human rights situation.

## MISSION

GCHR is an independent, non-profit non-governmental organisation (NGO) that provides support and protection to human rights defenders (HRDs) in order to promote human rights, including but not limited to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly.

## VISION

To have vibrant civic spaces in the Middle East countries in which human rights are fully respected and HRDs, including journalists and Internet activists, can work free from oppression and fear.

## DONORS

GCHR's work in 2023 was funded by Sigrid Rausing Trust, the Open Society Foundation, the European Union, Tides Foundation, the Norwegian Human Rights Fund and IFEX, among other donors. We do not accept funds from any governments in the countries in which we work. Thanks to donor partners for their support for this Annual Report. See more at: <https://www.gc4hr.org/our-purpose/>

## MEMBERSHIPS

GCHR is a member of IFEX, CIVICUS, FIDH, OMCT SOS Torture Network, the WHRD International Coalition, WHRD-MENA Network, Global Forum for Media Development, the UK Bar Human Rights Committee, the Arab Alliance for Digital Rights (AADR) and the Civil society coalition on Information and Democracy. GCHR's campaigns, joint actions and news are amplified and supported by these networks, including through the VUKA! Coalition and the CIVICUS Monitor.



# DEDICATION

**This report is dedicated to all human rights defenders in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), particularly women and members of minority groups across the MENA region who are under severe stress and threats for their work..**



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The main objective of the Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR) is to foster a vibrant and safe civic space in which human rights defenders (HRDs) and other civil society actors are free to work for the protection and promotion of human rights. Throughout 2023, GCHR continued to support HRDs, including independent lawyers, journalists, academics and online activists, across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) with an emphasis on the Gulf region and neighbouring countries, through its core activities of documentation and research, monitoring and publicising cases of HRDs at risk, advocacy and campaigns, capacity building and protection and assistance.



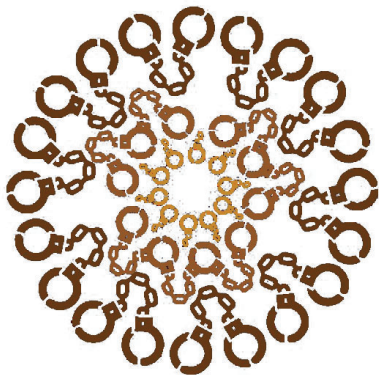
Throughout 2023, GCHR, alongside its local partners and international allies, continued to play a vital role in ensuring that cases that might otherwise not receive the attention they deserve are brought to the fore in predominantly English-speaking media and advocacy circles, including at the United Nations Human Rights Council or events such as World Press Freedom Day. GCHR continued its work in coalition with partner organisations on campaigns for imprisoned HRDs including its co-founder Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja in Bahrain and Advisory Board member Ahmed Mansoor in the United Arab Emirates (UAE).



In 2023, GCHR issued 86 appeals and six urgent actions, joint statements and letters relating to WHRDs and HRDs across the region. GCHR also published four reports, either alone or jointly with partners, including joint submissions on the UAE and Saudi Arabia for their respective UN Periodic Reviews, its Annual Report, and a comprehensive report on challenges facing journalists in the MENA region. Furthermore, GCHR continued its longstanding work of regular reporting on the human rights situation in Iraq, publishing five Periodic Reports on violations of freedom of expression and assembly in Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan.

GCHR continued to shed light on the harmful practices of sportswashing and greenwashing that many countries across the region engage in as an attempt to improve their image on the global stage.

GCHR and 35 partners once again held the extremely successful Alternative Human Rights Expo II, an online event on 15 November 2023 ahead of the 28th session of the Conference of Parties (COP28) held from 30 November to 12 December 2023 in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). It was part of a larger campaign surrounding the COP28 to highlight human rights violations in the UAE and surrounding countries, in an attempt to help free human rights defenders.



ALTERNATIVE  
HUMAN RIGHTS EXPO  
إكسبو حقوق الإنسان

# INTRODUCTION

This annual report covers the period between 01 January 2023 and 31 December 2023. It summarises GCHR's activities advocating on behalf of HRDs, activists, academics, journalists, protesters and citizens so that they can exercise their human rights peacefully and free from oppression. In addition to documenting our advocacy efforts and activities, the report also covers the ways in which we have helped to strengthen the capacity of HRDs and other civil society actors working to peacefully promote and protect human rights throughout the MENA region.

At the outset, GCHR wishes to recognise and pay tribute to its local, regional and international partners, including UN experts, with whom it has continued to enjoy fruitful relationships in our mutual work to amplify and support the work of HRDs and civil society actors across the Middle East countries.

Part I of this report summarises GCHR's thematic and country-specific campaigns, advocacy before international organisations such as the United Nations and legal advocacy. Part II highlights the various thematic and country reports published by GCHR over the past year. Part III summarises the practical support GCHR has provided to HRDs and civil society actors throughout 2023. Part IV provides "snapshots" of the human rights situation in each of the countries we work in across the MENA region and the report concludes with a regional human rights overview at Part V and recommendations for the coming year at Part VI.

# PART I

# ADVOCACY AND CAMPAIGNS

Throughout 2023, GCHR demonstrated solidarity with HRDs, activists, civil society actors and fellow human rights organisations working to protect and promote human rights in the Middle East countries.



# General Campaigns

In February 2023, GCHR joined a new **human rights campaign** with a coalition of partners, Stand up for UAE Detainees (@SANIDUAE), to work on human rights advocacy in the UAE. The coalition includes AI-QST, the Emirates Detainees Advocacy Centre, the International Campaign for Freedom in the UAE, the International Center for Justice and Human Rights and MENA Rights Group. The campaign carried out a host of activities in 2023 including webinars, interviews and a petition.



On World Press Freedom Day, celebrated every year on 3 May, GCHR called on the authorities in the MENA region to protect the right to freedom of expression, and end attacks on journalists. 2023 marks the 30th anniversary of World Press Freedom Day, which coincided with the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

On 1 September 2023, GCHR joined an event organised by BCHR to help free Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja.

GCHR and many partners circulated videos and posts to mark Ahmed Mansoor's 54th birthday on 22 October 2023.

# GCHR Organises Alternative Human Rights Expo II



GCHR and 35 partners presented the [Alternative Human Rights Expo II](#), an online event on 15 November 2023. You can watch the event on GCHR's [YouTube](#) (English and [Arabic](#)) account, and visit the gallery [here](#). Michel Forst, the world's first UN Special Rapporteur on Environmental Defenders under the Aarhus Convention,

[introduced](#) the event. The Alternative Human Rights Expo II called for the release of HRDs such as Emirati HRD Ahmed Mansoor, and others in the region who have been tortured and imprisoned such as Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja in Bahrain, Salma Al-Shehab in Saudi Arabia, Nobel Prize winner Narges Mohammadi in Iran, and Alaa Abdel Fattah in Egypt.

GCHR contributed 5 cases of imprisoned WHRDs to the WHRD International Coalition campaign [#SpreadingTheEcho](#) ahead of International WHRDs Day on 29 November 2023. Fortunately, one of the featured WHRDs, Nasrin Sotoudeh in Iran, was released in November before the campaign began.



# UN Advocacy

At the 52nd session of the UN Human Rights Council (27 Feb - 4 April), GCHR engaged in advocacy on various topics. We took part in the informal consultation on the draft resolution on the situation of human rights in the Syrian Arab Republic on 14 March, to discuss recommendations from



the Truth and Justice Charter (a coalition of 10 associations of victims/survivors and families of individuals disappeared by all parties to the conflict) during the informal discussion.

On 14 March 2023, GCHR co-sponsored a UNHRC [side event](#) in Geneva where Mary Lawlor presented her new report “Success through perseverance and solidarity: 25 years of achievements by human rights defenders”.

GCHR also presented recommendations from its joint Universal Periodic Review (UPR) [Submission](#) on the UAE at the UPR Pre-Sessions organised by UPR-Info. The submission was made with CIVICUS, OMCT and EDAC. Partners from EDAC, MENA Rights Group, ICFUAE and Access Now also made presentations.

GCHR and partners supported the [resolution](#) renewing the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on HRDs for three years. GCHR signed a [joint letter](#) initiated by ISHR along with almost 170 CSOs which states, “This is a key opportunity for States and the Council to demonstrate their support and recognition for the indispensable role human rights defenders play to ensure that all people enjoy freedom, dignity, justice and equality.”

In July 2023, GCHR and CIVICUS made [a joint submission](#) to Saudi Arabia’s UPR focused on freedom of expression, association and assembly.



On 3 July 2023, ADHRB, GCHR, FIDH and the #FreeAlKhawaja Campaign held a [side event](#) to discuss the lack of medical treatment faced by Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja and other imprisoned human rights defenders. It was well-attended by states including the US, Denmark, Germany, Austria, Belgium, Switzerland, and Yemen.

During the UN Human Rights Council's September and October sessions, GCHR organised a UNHRC [side event](#) on WHRDs in conflict, post-conflict and crisis-affected settings in the MENA region. The event was co-hosted by the Rafto Foundation and Urgent Action Fund.

On 19 September 2023, GCHR, activists from all regions of the world and a coalition of 17 civil society organisations [gathered outside the Palais des Nations](#) in Geneva to call for better protection of their work, mark the 25th anniversary of the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders and call for an update of this landmark document.

On 18 and 19 September 2023, ALQST and GCHR delivered a [joint oral statement](#) at the UNHRC's 54th Session, addressing arbitrary detentions in Saudi Arabia during the Interactive Dialogue with the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention.

On 27 September, 2023 GCHR co-sponsored another HRC54 side event: "Silencing Dissent: the risk for Human Rights Defenders in Bahrain". At the event, people heard from Bahraini HRDs, highlighting the silencing of and reprisals taken against them. Disturbingly, Bahraini WHRD Ebtisam Al-Saegh was the target of defamatory tweets on her return to Bahrain.

On 3 October 2023, GCHR [addressed the UN Human Rights Council](#) on the UAE at its UPR adoption by the HRC, noting the 60 prisoners held past their sentences and the ongoing unjust imprisonment of Ahmed Mansoor. One of our partners, CIVICUS, also prepared a video statement supported by GCHR, EDAC and OMCT, which jointly prepared a UPR on UAE together in 2023.



Ahead of Saudi Arabia's UPR in January 2024, GCHR and CIVICUS made a joint submission together and GCHR's Geneva Representative Michael Khambatta made a presentation at the UPR-Info pre-sessions on 1 December, addressing Freedoms of Association, Expression, and Peaceful Assembly along with the silencing of civil society including Human Rights Defenders. The UPR pre-session provides an important platform for civil society to share its recommendations with UN member states ahead of the formal UPR process. If promoted by member states and accepted by Saudi Arabia, these recommendations have the potential to bring about significant change. GCHR is working with ALQST, MENA Rights Group, Reprieve, Amnesty and the European Saudi Organisation for Human Rights (ESOHR) on advocacy with member states.

In December, GCHR's Executive Director Khalid Ibrahim attended a [Consultation](#) in Geneva with Clément Nyaletsossi Voule, UN Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association. They discussed a **“Model Protocol for Law Enforcement: Promoting and Protecting Human Rights in the Context of Peaceful Protests”** which was developed by the Special Rapporteur, in collaboration with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR).



# Advocacy Against Repressive Laws & Surveillance

On 15 June 2023, GCHR, in cooperation with Human Rights Watch, the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS), and the Civil Society Coalition on Human Rights and Counter-Terrorism held an event in New York to discuss the “Impact of Counter-Terrorism Policies on Human Rights in the Middle East and North Africa”. Watch the video on GCHR’s YouTube [here](#).

GCHR continues its work with the [MENA Coalition to Counter Surveillance](#), co-founded with Access Now.

## GCHR participates in Kyoto IGF 2023

In October, Khalid Ibrahim travelled to the [Internet Governance Forum](#) in Kyoto, Japan where he participated in many sessions and GCHR organised a networking session on Surveillance Technology Governance and Human Rights. On 11 October 2023, Ibrahim moderated the session entitled, “Surveillance Technology in MENA: Different Levels of Accountability”. Khalid talked about the MCCA, co-led by GCHR and Access Now, which was launched at RightsCon in June 2021. He mentioned our colleague Ahmed Mansoor, the first victim of spyware, who is in prison. “We are still in pain,” he noted.



# PART II

# GCHR's

# THEMATIC

# AND COUNTRY

# REPORTS

 In 2023, GCHR published the following reports and joint UPR submissions.



## Challenges Facing Journalists in the MENA Region



On 03 May 2023, GCHR published a [report on the challenges facing journalists in the MENA Region](#). The report is informed by GCHR's work with UNESCO's Global Media Defense Fund on "Investigating impunity for crimes against journalists in the Arab States, while providing protection". Through the GMDF project, GCHR hired journalists to investigate different types of violations that impact a journalist's ability to work, including a case of a disappeared Syrian journalist who may have been murdered, and a Palestinian journalist shot in the eye, who nearly lost his life. In addition, we have cases of women journalists who are attacked and harassed in Iraq and Palestine, including with online photos, making them want to leave their work. We also have investigations in Morocco about the imprisonment of journalists through false accusations, and an investigation in Lebanon into the use of military courts to prosecute journalists.

The report builds on GCHR's previous investigations into the extent to which journalists in the MENA region continue to face grave violations of their civil and human rights, including murder by governments or armed groups, usually with total impunity. Countries such as Syria, Iraq, Libya, Palestine and Yemen continue to be classified among the most dangerous places for journalists.



## Joint Submission to Saudi Arabia's UPR

On 27 July 2023, GCHR and CIVICUS published a [Joint Submission](#) to the UN Universal Periodic Review (UPR) examining the legal framework related to civic space in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which lacks basic rights protections and severely restricts freedoms of association, peaceful assembly and expression. The submission documents in particular the continued misuse of the overly broad and vague Counter-Terrorism Law of 2017 and the Cybercrime Law of 2007 to clamp down on human rights and peaceful activists. The submission also sheds light on the continued judicial persecution of human rights defenders, including women human rights defenders, who face additional systemic barriers and challenges such as sexual harassment as they advocate for gender equality and the rights of women.

## Joint Submission to the UAE's UPR

On 15 March 2023, GCHR, the Emirates Detainees Advocacy Centre (EDAC), the World Organisation against Torture (OMCT) and CIVICUS published a [Joint Submission](#) to the UPR on the UAE. The report analyses the UAE's compliance with its international human rights obligations to create and maintain a safe and enabling environment for civil society. The report raises deep concerns about the barriers against civil society organisations (CSOs) operating independently in the UAE, the hostile environment created by the UAE for CSOs, the denial of labour rights and the use of security-related legislation to persecute human rights defenders, academics, journalists and bloggers.

## Periodic Reports on violations of freedom of expression and assembly in Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan

Throughout 2023, GCHR published [five Periodic Reports](#) on violations of freedom of expression and assembly in Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan. GCHR has documented the human rights situation in Iraq during the past five years since the start of the popular movement. In that time, it published 29 periodic reports detailing the grave violations taking place in the country, including five in the past year.

The reports document the repression of demonstrations and other grave violations including assassinations and the targeting of journalists.



## **PART III**

# **GCHR's PRACTICAL SUPPORT TO HRDs AND CIVIL SOCIETY ACTORS**

Throughout 2023, GCHR organised numerous training workshops, a Consultation between UN Special Rapporteurs and over two dozen MENA HRDs, an online digital security training module with videos for WHRDs, emergency grants to WHRDs at risk, a WHRDs HelpDesk and campaign accelerator training in Iraq.



نحن منظمة غير حكومية، مستقلة وغير ربحية

# مركز الخليج لحقوق الإنسان

حماية المدافعين عن حقوق الإنسان لتعزيز الحرية والسلام والعدالة في منطقة الشرق الأوسط وشمال إفريقيا

اشترك

## GCHR Launches New Website and Emergency Hub

GCHR launched its new website in June 2023, where cases are more easily searchable and over 100 resources on well-being, legal support and support funds located in English and Arabic in an Emergency Hub, which also offers a mechanism for HRDs to seek emergency support.

In 2023, as part of a project with the Innovation for Change (I4C) MENA Hub, GCHR created a series of online digital security workshops for MENA WHRDs based on a feminist methodology. The trainer created a video on the topic before each session and then ran through the training live, which allows the participants to answer questions. You can find the training videos (in Arabic) in a playlist on [GCHR's YouTube](#).

GCHR continued to work with UN and EU protection mechanisms including ProtectDefender.EU and the EU Temporary Relocation Programme, as well as launching a fellowship programme that assisted HRDs from Bahrain, Iraq and Yemen to travel to Egypt or Lebanon for respite from a threatening environment.

# GCHR's Regional MENA UN Consultations

A key way that we engage WHRDs and HRDs from the region with UN experts is through GCHR's in-person MENA Regional Consultations with UN Special Rapporteurs, such as the one held in April 2023 with the UN SR on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, the UN SR of the situation of human rights defenders, and the UN Working Group on Business and Human Rights.

The gathering also promoted solidarity in human rights advocacy and activism, bringing together 27 W/HRDs from 17 MENA countries. Security training and introductions to donors and regional and international NGOs were provided. The consultation is designed to feed into reports which the Special Rapporteur will present to the UN. Engagement with UN Mechanisms is one of the best ways to transmit human rights violations from countries that participate in the UN system. Communications with the UN SRs and mechanisms such as the UPR provide an opportunity to give feedback and recommendations to member states in order for them to improve their practises, which can provide protection to local W/HRDs.



**PART IV**

**COUNTRY**

**SNAPSHOTS**



# BAHRAIN

In 2023, GCHR published two urgent actions and three appeals on Bahrain.

## In the spotlight

GCHR's urgent actions on Bahrain called for help to free Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja and [support hunger-striking prisoners](#) in Bahrain. In August 2023, 800 political prisoners went on hunger strike in Bahrain's notorious Jau Prison demanding better prison conditions. The protest, which began on 07 August 2023, is one of the country's largest political crises since mass pro-democracy protests were repressed in 2011 and has led to street protests. On 11 September 2023, over 800 prisoners suspended their hunger strike to allow the authorities to implement promised improvements such as increased duration of calls with family members, access to sunlight and better access to health care.

GCHR issued another urgent action on the anniversary of Al-Khawaja's arrest on 09 April 2011 [calling on Denmark to demand his freedom](#).



GCHR's appeals on Bahrain included a [Joint Letter](#) to the US Biden Administration expressing urgent concerns for the life of Al-Khawaja in light of his rapidly deteriorating health. GCHR also called on the Bahraini authorities to [cease their mistreatment of imprisoned human rights defenders](#) and activists including Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja, Dr. Abduljalil Al-Singace, and Naji Fateel. GCHR further drew attention to the [case of imprisoned human rights defender Dr Al-Singace](#) as he marked the anniversary of a hunger strike he began on 8 July 2021 in response to the prison authorities' confiscation of his book on Bahraini dialects of Arabic that he spent four years researching and writing by hand. During his hunger strike he has been sustaining himself only on multivitamin liquid supplement, tea with milk and sugar, water and salts. His health has significantly deteriorated.



# IRAN

In 2023, GCHR published three appeals on the plight of journalists and WHRDs in Iran.

## In the spotlight

Prominent woman human rights defender Narges Mohammadi, who remains in prison in Iran along with many other women's rights defenders, was [awarded the 2023 Nobel Peace Prize](#).

The Norwegian Nobel Committee said it gave the Peace Prize to Mohammadi “for her fight against the oppression of women in Iran and her fight to promote human rights and freedom for all. Her brave struggle has come with

tremendous personal costs. Altogether, the authorities have arrested her 13 times, convicted her five times, and sentenced her to a total of 31 years in prison and 154 lashes.”

In October 2023, GCHR reported that journalists Niloofer Hamedi and Elahe Mohammadi were sentenced to 13 and 12 years in prison in Iran respectively on several charges. Hamedi received seven years in prison and Mohammadi received six years in prison for “collaborating with the hostile US government”. They also received an additional five years in prison for “acting against the national security” and a year for “propaganda”. Update: They were freed on bail in January 2024.



Also in October 2023, 16-year-old Armita Geravand was pulled unconscious out of a Tehran metro car by four people. The authorities claimed she had low blood pressure and fell and hit her head, but witnesses say she was violently beaten by a state security unit for not wearing hijab. She was reported to be brain-dead after her beating, and subsequently died on 28 October 2023.

In August 2023, GCHR strongly [condemned the continued crackdown on WHRDs](#) as the anniversary of Mahsa Amini's death approached. In the months following her death, dozens of WHRDs, activists and journalists were among over 20,000 people arrested, including women journalists who reported on Amini's death and funeral. In the run up to the first anniversary of her death, the authorities proceeded to detain activists, the majority of whom were women.

In March 2023, GCHR reported that there were [at least 38 women journalists behind bars](#) in Iran, making it the largest prison for women journalists in the world. They are among tens of thousands of people arrested since the "Women, Life, Freedom" protests started over Mahsa (Zhin) Amini's death on 16 September 2022, as the authorities attempted to silence citizens by violating their rights to freedom of expression and assembly.



# IRAQ

Throughout 2023, GCHR published five Periodic Reports on violations of freedom of expression and assembly in Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan, and supported two campaigns.

## In the Spotlight

GCHR continued its leading work reporting on human rights violations in Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan that might otherwise not receive coverage. GCHR's comprehensive reporting covered hundreds of cases of HRDs, journalists, academics, public officials, and other civil society activists who have been assassinated, attacked, kidnapped, disappeared, arbitrarily arrested and detained with impunity. They include prominent civil society activist Ali Mahmoud Abboud Al-Sabawi who was assassinated by two gunmen on motorcycles in Baghdad on 16 October 2023. Al-Sabawi, who was from Mosul, actively participated in the popular movement since its start on 01 October 2019. Shortly before he was assassinated, he participated in a demonstration to mark the anniversary of the start of the October Popular Movement.



Furthermore, on 25 September 2023, during the daytime, blogger Noor Al-Saffar (Noor BM) was killed in the Al-Mansour area in Baghdad after being shot in the neck and stomach by an unknown gunman. Another case GCHR highlighted in 2023 is that of journalist Nala Super who is still languishing in the prison of the Women's Correctional Facility in the city of Erbil after the Criminal Court issued against her on 07 December 2022, a prison sentence of five years and one month after convicting her of allegedly forging the annual registration document for a car. The reason for her arrest was not known at the time. Super is a sports journalist who works in the field of commercial advertising. Super was also the first Kurdish woman to open a men's barbershop.

In addition to its periodic reports, GCHR also published an account of the widespread [harassment](#) faced by women journalists in Iraq. Further reports by GCHR highlighted campaigns by Iraqi human rights groups who have been campaigning to [increase public awareness of Iraq's draft law on freedom of expression and peaceful assembly](#), as well as the campaign by several Iraqi human rights groups who [issued a Position Paper on "Climate Change and Environmental Activity in Iraq for the Climate Prospects Campaign"](#), following consultations with policy-makers, community leaders, and environmental experts in September and October 2023.



# JORDAN

■ In 2023, GCHR published seven appeals on Jordan.

## In the spotlight

GCHR's appeals covered the [sentencing of journalist Ahmed Hassan Al-Zoubi](#) to one year in prison, the continuing suppression of freedom of expression through the detention of writers and journalists including Khaled Turki Al-Majali and Ahmed Hassan Al-Zoubi and the [extradition of Dr Khalaf Al-Romaihi](#), an Emirati businessman and member of the UAE94 group, from Jordan to the UAE in violation of local and international laws.



GCHR also shed light on the [24-hour detention of journalist Hiba Abu Taha](#) for allegedly slandering an official body in a post on her Facebook page, the four-month prison sentence handed down to the coordinator of the Popular Campaign for the Defense of the Holy Qur'an, Dr. Ibrahim Al-Mansi and the [fierce social media campaign](#) against human rights defender Hala Aled in retaliation against her peaceful human rights work. In further news of violations of freedom of expression in Jordan, GCHR condemned the [draft Cybercrimes Law of 2023](#) as a clear attempt to suppress freedom of expression online.

# KUWAIT

■ In 2023, GCHR published nine appeals on Kuwait.

## In the spotlight

GCHR continued to shed light on the targeting of blogger Salman Al-Khalidi who, in November 2023, received a [five year prison sentence](#) from the State Security Criminal Court in retaliation against his peaceful human rights activities. In June 2023, [blogger Mohammed Al-Ajmi sought political asylum in Turkey](#) after



being repeatedly targeted by authorities. The severe restrictions on freedom of expression in Kuwait were further highlighted by the [arbitrary detention and deportation](#) of Mona Kareem, a writer and activist who defends the rights of the Bedoon community, as she attempted to visit her family in Kuwait.

GCHR continued to raise awareness of the authorities' [despicable treatment of the Bedoon community](#), including through the arrest of Mohammed Al-Barghash, a human rights activist in Kuwait who peacefully and tirelessly defends the rights of the Bedoon community, by the State Security Apparatus. In August 2023, the Bedoon rights activist Fadel Farhan was also [detained and later released on bail](#). Similar to other countries in the region, Kuwait has prepared [draft legislation that would regulate the media and place severe restrictions on freedom of expression](#).

# LEBANON

■ In 2023, GCHR published three appeals on Lebanon.

## In the spotlight

All three appeals highlighted the threats facing journalists in Lebanon. In December 2023, GCHR reported that, in recent years, [journalists in Lebanon have been victims of investigations and summonses](#) that led to widespread backlash in media circles and society at large. In November 2023, GCHR reported that [two journalists, Farah Omar and photojournalist Rabih Al-Maamari](#), had been killed by Israeli army fire in southern Lebanon.



Their death came one month after [journalist Issam Abdullah was also killed by an Israeli air strike](#) which targeted a group of journalists in Alma Al-Shaab, located in southern Lebanon. During the attack itself, six other journalists were injured. The journalists were monitoring the clashes in southern Lebanon. They prominently displayed signs indicating that they were journalists, in addition to wearing helmets and press vests.



# OMAN

■ In 2023, GCHR published two reports on Oman.

## In the spotlight

Both reports covered violations against internet activists and women. In August 2023, GCHR reported that four Internet activists were [facing a retrial](#) in the case known as “Ghaith spaces”. This appeal hearing comes after the Court of First Instance in Sohar issued its ruling sentencing the four Internet activists



to three years in prison after charging them with “using the Internet and information technology means to produce what would prejudice religious values and public order” and “inviting [people] to participate in a meeting for the sake of opposing the Islamic religion and defaming the foundations on which it is based.”

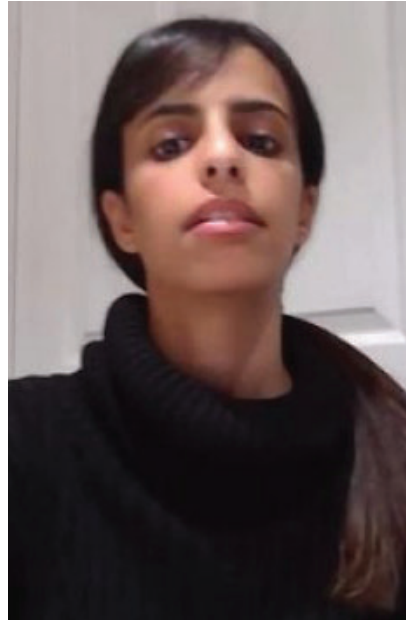
GCHR also reported on the [kidnapping of online activist Majid bin Abdullah Al-Ruhaili](#) by the Internal Security Service while he was in a gym in Muscat. He was subsequently released. GCHR also covered the brutal killing of two women, a lawyer killed by her ex-husband and the killing of a student by a man who chased her in his car.

# QATAR

■ In 2023, GCHR issued seven appeals on Qatar.

## In the spotlight

GCHR called for human rights lawyers Hazzaa Al-Marri and Rashid Al-Marri to be freed. They are [currently serving life imprisonment](#) in retaliation against their peaceful activities. GCHR also raised awareness of the [case of woman human rights defender Noof Al-Madeed](#) who left Qatar for the UK to escape domestic violence and subsequently disappeared upon her return to Qatar.



GCHR continued to condemn Qatar's campaign of sportswashing its grave human rights violations by [reporting on the many violations](#) that have followed the conclusion of the FIFA World Cup that was hosted by Qatar in 2022. In this regard, GCHR expressed its concerns about reports that some of the institutions close to the Qatari government [made an offer to acquire the Manchester United football club](#), which competes in the Premier League, the top division in the English football league system. In 2023, Qatar also [targeted human rights defenders residing outside of Qatar](#), including Abdullah Al-Maliki who resides in Germany. Similarly, Qatar continued to refuse the repeated demands of Qatari journalist Faraj Mezher Al-Shammari to [reinstate his Qatari nationality](#) after he was stripped of it in 1999 in retaliation against an article he wrote. He was then deported to Saudi Arabia where he has lived with his family ever since.



# SAUDI ARABIA

In 2023, GCHR issued two urgent actions and 12 appeals on Saudi Arabia.

## In the spotlight

The urgent actions focussed on [calling for the release of 10 Egyptian Nubian citizens](#) after three years in detention and the [freedom of Saudi human rights defender Dr. Mohammed Al-Qahtani](#). GCHR's appeals included the [ongoing lack of information on the fate and whereabouts of Dr. Al-Qahtani](#) after his disappearance in 2022, the submission of an [amicus brief](#) for Loujain Al-Hathloul's spyware



trial, a [report on the widespread persecution of imprisoned human rights defenders](#), and the [targeting of women activists](#).

In an alarming case indicative of the Saudi authorities' increase of the use of the death penalty to silence opinions, internet activist Dr. Saeed bin Nasser Al-Ghamdi was [sentenced to death](#) in relation to a number of tweets. The dire state of freedom of expression in Saudi Arabia was further exemplified in 2023 by the [sentencing to prison for decades-long sentences of two young doctors Osama Khalid and Ziad Al-Sufyani for their contributions to Wikipedia posts in Arabic](#). Both have contributed to the online encyclopaedia, which is maintained and managed by volunteers, over the last decade, and had edited articles about woman human rights defender Loujain Al-Hathloul.

# SYRIA

■ In 2023, GCHR issued five appeals on Syria.

## In the spotlight



GCHR's work in 2023 highlighted the [prominence of women at the forefront of leading human rights protests](#) that started in September 2023 in Syria, the [fierce defamation campaign](#) facing woman human rights defender Hiba Al-Hajji and her team, and a [vicious attack](#) against human rights defender and executive director of the Syrian Center for Democracy and Civil Rights Jdea Abdullah Nawfal. In 2023, GCHR also welcomed the establishment of the [Independent Institution on Missing Persons in Syria](#).

# UAE

In 2023, GCHR issued two urgent actions and eight appeals on the UAE.

## In the spotlight

The urgent actions called for the release of all those on trial in the [UAE84 case](#) and the dropping of all charges against them. GCHR also presented the [Alternative Human Rights Expo II video](#) as a campaign tool to call for freedom for human rights defenders imprisoned in the UAE and elsewhere in the MENA Region. GCHR also reported on its joint submission with Access Now of an [amicus brief](#) calling on the Oregon U.S. District Court to hold the Emirati spyware outfit DarkMatter accountable for illegally hacking prominent Saudi women's rights activist Loujain Al-Hathloul.



GCHR conducted an [intense year of advocacy on the ongoing human rights violations](#) in the UAE as the country prepared to host the COP28 Climate Conference in 2023. In particular, GCHR called for the UAE authorities to [release all those unjustly imprisoned](#) before COP28. In this regard, GCHR particularly highlighted the cases of Ahmed Mansoor and other unjustly and arbitrarily detained human rights defenders and activists, [many of whom remain imprisoned beyond the end of their sentences](#). GCHR expressed its grave concerns about the extradition of Dr. Khalaf Al-Romaithi, a member of the UAE94, from Jordan to the UAE. In a slap in the face to the international community, new fabricated “terrorism” charges were laid against against 84 Emiratis, including over 60 activists belonging to the “UAE94” who are being held in prison past the end of their sentences, as well as GCHR’s Board member Ahmed Mansoor, and academic Dr. Nasser Bin Ghaith. If convicted of the new charges, they could face life imprisonment or the death penalty. The case is all the more shocking because the first hearing began in December while the UAE was hosting the COP28.



# YEMEN

■ In 2023, GCHR issued 12 appeals on Yemen.

## In the spotlight

At the end of 2023, GCHR reported on the alarming [death sentence issued against human rights defender](#) Fatima Saleh Al-Arwali based on trumped up charges in retaliation against her human rights work, including defending women's and child rights; and called for her sentence to be overturned. The sentence has yet to be ratified. The [perilous situation facing journalists and internet activists](#) continued to feature heavily in GCHR's reporting in Yemen throughout 2023. However, in one piece of positive news from April 2023, GCHR reported that four journalists were [released three years after being sentenced to death](#).



# PART V

# REGIONAL

# HUMAN

# RIGHTS

# OVERVIEW

Similarly to previous years, arbitrary arrest and detention remain one of the most pervasive forms of repression used against peaceful HRDs and WHRDs across the MENA region.



Similarly to previous years, arbitrary arrest and detention remain one of the most pervasive forms of repression used against peaceful HRDs and WHRDs across the MENA region, and HRDs, WHRDs and other civil society actors continue to face torture and ill-treatment, particularly in places of detention, with impunity. A worrying pattern of holding human rights defenders past their sentences and trying them in new cases emerged in Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which don't allow any public dissent. As was apparent from the country snapshots, the targeting of journalists and online activists features heavily in reports for 2023.

Another alarming trend is the concerted efforts of Gulf countries with atrocious human rights records to consolidate their already significant economic and geo-political power by projecting a progressive image on the world stage. One example of this is the publicity generated by the COP28 held in the UAE from 30 November – 12 December 2023 amidst an ongoing climate of oppression against human rights defenders and civil society actors.

The past year has continued to evidence a worrying crackdown on women's rights, particularly in Iran where peaceful protesters came under an intense crackdown on the first anniversary of the death of Mahsa Amini, and in Saudi Arabia, where women's rights defenders have been sentenced to decades in prison.

Finally, the systematic silencing of men and women HRDs, journalists, internet activists, peaceful protesters and other civil society actors through arbitrary arrests and detentions, judicial harassment, enforced disappearance, attacks, threats and assassinations, has been a recurring theme.

# PART VI

# RECOMMENDATIONS

■ In light of these patterns of oppression across the region, GCHR recommends that:



**In light of these patterns of oppression across the region, GCHR recommends that:**

1. Governments across the MENA region repeal vague and punitive legislation that exerts a chilling effect on or even criminalises peaceful human rights work, freedom of expression and freedom of association.
2. Governments across the MENA region enact legislation on human rights, freedom of expression and assembly and information technology in line with international human rights norms.
3. Governments across the MENA region repeal archaic and oppressive laws limiting women's freedom and enact progressive, rights-protecting legislation fit for the modern era.
4. Authorities across the region tackle impunity by enabling thorough, transparent and independent investigations into the perpetration of attacks, assassinations, enforced disappearances, arbitrary detentions, torture and ill-treatment against HRDs, civil society activists, journalists, lawyers and academics.
5. The international community cease to embolden the region's governments in committing human rights violations with impunity by pandering to the efforts of oppressive countries to sanitise their image on the world stage.

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