



ADHRB Responds to State Department's 2016 Saudi Arabia Human Rights report

Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain cautiously welcomes the United States Department of State's Saudi 2016 Human Rights report. With several exceptions, the report addresses the numerous human rights abuses perpetrated by the Saudi government within the last year.

The report addresses a number of thematic issue areas, including freedom of expression and assembly, detention, torture and unfair trials, executions, human rights defenders, and labor violations. The report describes the legal frameworks underpinning the myriad human rights abuses committed by the government. It illustrates how the Basic Law and Press and Publications Law in conjunction with regulatory agencies and ministerial bodies work to censor or close media outlets, while security forces detain bloggers and writers who criticize the government. It notes that the government prohibits protests and political gatherings, while also refusing to license political and social organizations. The country does not allow for the functioning of political or social civil society and closes organizations and jails activists who attempt to operate such organizations. Among the groups officials have forced to close are the Saudi Association for Civil and Political Rights, the Adala Center for Human Rights, [al-Belady--a women's civil society group](#)--and the Monitor of Human Rights in Saudi Arabia.

In addition to criminalizing critical expression and associations, the report notes that prisoners sometimes face unfair trials marred by torture and torture-coerced confessions. Among the detainees who were sentenced in trials that did not comply with international standards of due process and fair trials are Fadhil al-Manasif, Ali al-Nimr, Dawood al-Marhoon, and Abdullah al-Zaher. In [al-Nimr, al-Zaher, and al-Marhoon's](#) cases, the court refused to allow them access to their lawyers while they were detained and later admitted their coerced confessions as viable evidence in their trials. This evidence proved crucial in sentencing them to death.

While the State Department's report highlights and discusses widespread human rights abuses in Saudi Arabia, there are several significant issues with the report. In the report, the State Department states that, "There was one allegation that the government or its agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings in the country." However, ADHRB would like to call attention to the executions of four minors on 2 January 2016, [Amin al-Ghamidi, Ali al-Ribh, Mustafa Abkar, and Mishaal al-Faraaj](#). The government arrested them while they were under the age of 18 and detained them incommunicado. Officials tortured them until they confessed to a number of crimes put to them by authorities. Throughout their detention, officials denied them the right to talk to their lawyers. During their court proceedings, the court and prosecution used their coerced confessions to convict them and sentence them to death. The nature of their arrests, detention, and trials violates international law and international standards of due process and fair trials, such that their executions resemble arbitrary or unlawful killings.

While the report highlights the many human rights abuses in the country, it is, more broadly speaking, not critical enough of the kingdom and government's practices. The report states that "Incommunicado detention was sometimes a problem. Authorities reportedly did not always respect a detainees' right to contact family members following arrest." Through its Saudi UN complaint program operated in cooperation with the European-Saudi Organisation for Human Rights, ADHRB has found that incommunicado detention is a frequent occurrence. Moreover, during that time, authorities usually torture the detainees. The report notes that "There were no confirmed reports of impunity involving the security forces during the year, although the UN Committee Against Torture noted that the lack of frequent investigations into abuses created a climate of impunity." From its work with victims of human rights abuses, particularly detention, ADHRB has found that officials who torture detainees are rarely, if



ever prosecuted. Furthermore, because independent bodies cannot freely undertake visits to the country, it is startling that the State Department would declare impunity relatively a non-issue.

Lastly, the report discusses the war in Yemen and the Saudi coalition's involvement, including the [Joint Incident Assessment Team \(JIAT\)](#). Human rights organizations have demonstrated that the Saudi-led coalition has carried out tens of airstrikes in residential areas and have killed [hundreds of civilians](#). Despite this, the JIAT has only released summaries of eight incidents and declared that the coalition is largely blameless. Despite the serious and credible allegations against the coalition and the JIAT's incomplete work, the State Department has steered away from criticism of the JIAT and largely focused attention on the crimes of the Houthi-Saleh forces. In the report's discussion of the Saudi-coalition's blockade on Yemeni ports, the State Department largely blames the Houthi-Saleh forces for their role in causing a humanitarian disaster, while also ignoring the vast humanitarian consequences of the naval blockade. Both sides are committing human rights violations, but the report largely ignores the role of Saudi Arabia and its coalition allies.

"We cautiously welcome the State Department's report on human rights abuses in Saudi Arabia. It is good to see a lengthy in-depth report detailing the numerous violations committed in the kingdom," states Husain Abdulla, the Executive Director of ADHRB. "However, describing the abuses is not enough. The United States is simply not critical enough of the endemic violations taking place. It needs to take a stronger stance and adjust its foreign policy to address the issues contained in the report."

The State Department's Saudi Arabia's 2016 human rights report covers the human rights abuses in the kingdom and explains the legal framework behind the abuses. It details individual cases and situations where the government violated an individual's human rights or international law. However, the report is not critical enough of the kingdom and its abuses. Incommunicado detention is not a "problem," it is almost endemic and leads in many cases to torture and coerced confessions. The report is more concerned with focusing on the human rights abuses of the Houthi-Saleh forces, leaving aside the numerous human rights abuses perpetrated by Saudi Arabia and its coalition partners. This report is a good first step for the United States to recognize the many issues in Saudi Arabia. However, it is too late for the United States to be beginning at first steps, it needs to demonstrate its concern and act on its concern if it does not want to be seen as aiding and abetting the kingdom in its violations.